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IN MAREMMA

A Story

By OUIDA

AMOR CH' A NULLO AMATO AMAR PERDONA'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

London

CHATTO & WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1882

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IN MAREMMA.

CHAPTER XV.

DURING this second summer that she passed upon the moors, early in a May morning, when she was out on the waters, there was a vessel standing off the shore ; a rare sight there, for, though many sailing ships and steamers passed in the offing, no one of them ever came close in, unless it were a tartana coasting, much less did any cast anchor anywhere nearer than Civita Vecchia one way, or Livorno the other.

This vessel, however, a comely barque of Sicilian rig, a brig of some 100 tons, had

paused in her course for her crew to fish, as in the clear water a shoal of tunny had been seen, and the nets had been thrown in amidst it. The men hailed her in her boat, and asked her some questions as to the soundings and the coast; for there was a fog on the horizon, a white fog like a silver veil, and they thought it meant wind and water both, and they were strangers.

She answered them willingly, for she thought well of all sailors; and their skipper, a young fellow and handsome, whose first voyage it was on these seas, as he was of Palermo and had always traded eastward, pulled himself out to her in his long-boat, and threw into her little skiff some oranges and other fruit. As they were from a sailor she took them, and let him see her white shell-like teeth in a smile like sunshine in a storm. When she pulled her boat to shore, he pulled his too inland; and when she stepped through the shallow water and the sands, he stepped beside her.

He was very handsome, with a glowing, sun-warmed beauty, like one of his own Sicilian fruits. He was but twenty-three years of age; his heart was warm, and his head was hot. He said to her:

‘Maiden, where I come from the land is beautiful as the sea is; the shores laugh; the hills are rich as a mother’s breasts for her first-born; men and women live on fruit and wine, and song and love; yet not in my own Sicilia did ever I see so handsome a maiden as art thou!’

And this he said in his own soft amatory Sicilian tongue, which is like the flow of honey from the lip of a ewer of gold.

She looked straight at him and frowned a little.

‘I took your fruit, friend, because you gave me it with good friendliness; if you clog it with lies, I will fling it in the waves.’

The Sicilian stared at her hard with his brown starry eyes; then he laughed all over his face.

‘Lies? I said never a truer word. But if it displease you, so much the wiser are you. Tell me, who are you? Nay, do tell me, I pray of you.’

‘I am no one,’ said Musa, curtly. ‘They call me the Musoncella and the Velia. Go you back to your ship, and leave me to go home.’

‘Where is your home?’

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‘Where is your home?’

‘ On the moors ; miles inland.’

‘ May I visit you there ? ’

‘ No.’

He was silent a moment. Then he spoke again with fire and force :

‘ I am a stranger, and you answer me rightly. But listen to me one little minute. Nay, I am an honest man. I am Daniello the son of Febo, of the house of Villamagna. I have been a seaman all my days, and now I command the brig yonder, and own part of her too, my fair *Ausiliatrice* ; as good a brig as there sails on the high seas, trading with fruit as far as the misty cold northern coasts. That is all. But it is enough. I would not change with princes. I am my own master ; and yonder, in my island, I have withal to keep a wife in comfort. Now, look you, if you will be that wife I will be a happy man. What say you ? ’

He was only the rough skipper of a coaster that made the chief profits of her voyages for her merchant owners, not for him. But he was a Sicilian ; he had fire in his veins, fancy in his brain, passions in his heart ; he had been born under the flame and snow of the mighty Etna, and he had been lulled to his sleep from infancy with

the sound of the waters that wash the Golden Shell.

He was a sailor ; a son of rude Sicilian mariners ; but love had stricken him through the eyes, even as it struck great Dante, gallant Ariosto, and grave Petrarca.

For in this land this sudden birth of love is still a truth ; a fact, like the gold in the lily's heart or the red in the pomegranate's flower.

She stared at him, half enraged, half amazed. Then she shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of scorn and scepticism.

'Go back and say that to your Sicilian maidens. You remind me well that I have spoken too long to a stranger.'

Then she shook his fruits down on to the sands, and turned her back on him, and began to walk homeward with the dog, who had been in her boat beside her. The sailor was stung and wounded, yet he approved her. He stepped quickly on too, and kept pace with her a moment.

'As Gesu lives I speak in seriousness, and swear you honest love. One flash of your eyes to mine was enough ; that is how we love in Sicilia. My eyes to your heart say nothing, alas ! alas ! But this I swear

to you, oh cruel one and unjust ! I pass by here in four months' time with my cargo from the Scotch shores. Here I will land, and, if you will meet me, I will say the same again, and you shall go back with me to my isle, and we will build you a nest in the fig-tree and the cactus-hedge of my own shore. There is my hand on it, as I am Daniello, son of Febo, of the house of Villamagna.'

He stood before her on the lonely beach, and held out his hand ; he looked eager and passionate, and youthful and handsome as a young sea-god.

But he failed to touch her.

Her eyes laughed with incredulous scorn.

'In four months—we will see,' she said, with the same incredulity in her accent as in her glance.

'In four months you shall see,' said the sailor, with suppressed fury and pain. 'Oh, maiden, with whom have you dwelt that you have a heart like a stone to a man?'

'What matters it?' she said, with a shrug of her shoulders once more.

Her soul was dumb and blind as yet ; she could not understand ; she thought him mad, or in joke.

‘It will matter to you also, some day,’ said the Sicilian skipper.

‘Will you promise to be here on the beach this day four months?’ he pursued. ‘Come what winds and tides there may, here will I be.’

‘Not I,’ she answered him; ‘if you want to see me, then you may find me. But you will not.’

‘I will find you,’ he said passionately; ‘you have said they call you a sea-bird and the Musoncella.’

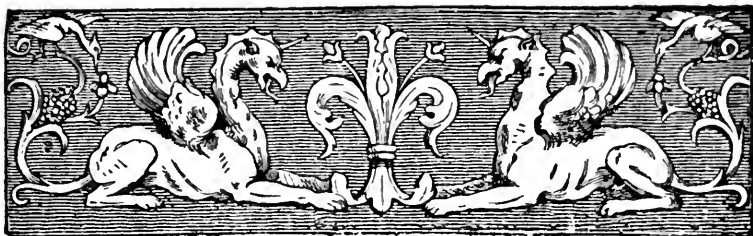
But ere he spoke she had taken to flight; going over the moist, red, moss-eaten earth as the wary lapwing skims it when the nets are spread in his sight. He could have followed her, for he was young and fleet, but a sense of awe and of timidity withheld him. He looked after her a little while, then he went back to his good brig.

It made no impression on Musa; her senses were unawakened, like the sting of the bee that lies undeveloped in the alveole; and her emotions were more quickly moved to anger than to pity. She ran on like a young ostrich who hears the negroes after it, and felt no safety till she had plunged once more into the friendly twilight of her home.

No thought of the future troubled her.

If the charcoal-burners never drove her out, or the shepherds never found her refuge and maltreated her, she feared nothing. It seemed to her that she would live on for hundreds of years, so, in that calm unending solitude, in that dreamful quiet place.





CHAPTER XVI.

MEANWHILE that morning, Zirlo, lying on the wild thyme and grass, was accosted by two strangers who were wandering over the moors on a vain quest for an Etruscan city, which was marked on old maps as lying to the south of San Lionardo.

These persons looked down on to the little faun-like figure of the shaggy child and his upraised pretty face, and said to him : ‘ My little man, can you tell us of any buried tombs, or any great old walls, known hereabouts ? ’

Zirlo rose up on his rosy feet and put his hand up against his eyes as if he were dazzled by the sun, and he answered at once and sturdily : ‘ No ; I never heard of any such thing.’

‘Try and think again. Look at this. It strengthens memory marvellously. If you can lead us to any such old places under the ground, this shall be yours.’

This was a broad silver coin—a whole scudo in solid silver!

Zirlo felt as if he were giddy.

‘There is no such place,’ he stammered; but his accent was unsteady and his eyes fastened on the silver bit glancing in the sun-rays.

‘There is such,’ said the stranger with insistence, ‘and I think you know it very well, and if you will bring us to it this scudo shall be yours. Come, my little lad, you will earn it cheaply.’

Zirlo grew red, grew pale, shuffled his feet on the turf, trembled, longed, feared, denied; then longed again.

‘You will not hurt her if I show you?’ he said wistfully.

The strangers laughed.

‘What should we hurt? We are only travellers, artists, archæologists. We will do no harm, little man; we will only give you that money and as much again if you lead us aright.’

Zirlo was silent in an agony of hesitation.

‘It is a cave you want?’ he stammered, ‘with coffins, and painted walls, and pipkins strewn about?’

‘Yes, yes,’ they said eagerly; ‘you know where to lead us. Come, go on, and we will follow you. Your goats can come to no danger here in this solitude. Why are you doubting about such a simple thing?’

Zefferino grew very white, his hands clenched nervously together, his teeth chattered as with cold; he was afraid of his own perfidy and of her vengeance. But the silver scudo!—it tempted him as the ‘Dio del Oro’ tempts alike in desolate country places as in crowded cities. What would it not buy! The boy, whose stomach was never full, and whose appetite was always keen, shook with the intensity of his longing.

‘And the place is as much mine as it is hers;’ he thought, with a sophism that came to him by nature.

Yet she had trusted him, and she had threatened him. Between his desire and his dread the little fellow was like one torn in twain by wild horses.

‘I dare not!’ he said at last, with a piteous sobbing and shivering.

‘The dead whom we seek had that passion, and it is the only human passion that is immortal,’ said his companion. ‘You were too quick to pay the greedy little imp; who knows whether he has cheated us or not? This may be but a fox’s earth.’

‘Foxes have no stairs, and we can soon see for ourselves,’ said the other, and he descended into the aperture and felt his way down the steps, and at the foot of them stood still in surprise at the tomb that was Musa’s home.

It was a grand tomb, he saw, Etruscan beyond doubt, and more perfect than most of these graves are when once the light of day and the eyes of curious mortality have fallen on them and found them out beneath their veil of myrtle and of bay leaves.

The stone biers, the stone chairs, the black pottery, the niche for the dog, the various paintings, all were Etruscan beyond question; but on the earthen floor there were the sticks and ashes of a spent fire; in the platter and one of the cups there were milk and bread and wild fruits, in a corner were a spinning wheel and a mandoline.

‘Some one must live here,’ they said one

to another, and understood why the child had been so afraid to bring them to it.

‘This is a coffin of to-day!’ cried one of them, who had penetrated into the third chamber, where old Joconda lay.

‘Some one lives here, sleeps and eats here, and here buries his dead,’ said his companion. ‘A woman it must be, for here are female clothes and the distaff.’

‘It is strange,’ replied the other. ‘But it is a grand tomb, and finely preserved. Let us make sketches while we can.’

And they sat down and spread out the colours they carried with them, for they were both artists, and one was a scholar. The latter sketched the proportions of the chambers of death, and copied the strange figures of the dancing women, of the winged boys, of the lotus flowers. The other made a drawing of the spinning wheel and the mandoline and the blackberry boughs that were thrown, full of berries, across an Etruscan dish, while a bronze lamp stood on the floor beside a bowl full of yellow marsh lilies.

The one would serve for some grand cartoon of an Etruscan marriage feast or burial banquet. The other would serve for some minute *genre* picture.

When Musa returned from her headlong flight across the country, she saw at the first glance that her careful screen of brushwood had been disturbed. Supposing that Zirlo had so stirred it by his usual boisterous entrance, she descended the steps, thinking there to find her playmate. But Leone growled and looked at her for some word of command, and she saw instead of the child the two strangers, who were intent on examining the paintings of the walls. She had no conception of what the men were like ; it was enough for her that they were human creatures, violators of her sanctuary and of the dead.

She advanced to them with all her face dark as the summer skies in tempest, and her eyes flashing like lightning.

‘How dare you. How dare you,’ she cried with intense passion. ‘All this is mine and *theirs*. You profane it, you blaspheme. Out of it ! Out of it ; or I will send the dog upon you !’

The two men stared at her, confused, and dimly almost doubting whether she were mortal, so sudden was her descent into the twilight of the cave, so burning and furious were her eyes and words.

‘Pardon us,’ said one, with hesitation. ‘Is this Etruscan tomb your care in any way? We did not know. We sought for a sepulchre that is marked on ancient maps. A little boy, a little goatherd, brought us here. If we offend——’

She turned very pale.

‘A goatherd! Zirlo?’

‘How should I know his name?’ said the stranger. ‘A little long-haired, bare-legged fellow. I am grieved if you are distressed, but how were we to know?’

‘Zirlo! Zirlo!’ she said again, with a bitter wondering sadness in the words that touched her listeners, though they could not understand its cause, and thought she was but jealous of the custody of the tombs and of the silver scudi.

‘If,’ began one of them, holding out a French gold piece; but his very breath was caught and stopped by the girl’s imperious gesture.

‘Get you gone or I shall hurt you!’ she said, as she motioned to the stairs. ‘This is my house, my home, my temple, my grave, my all! The boy betrayed me. He is vile. Get you gone!’

‘She is mad,’ they murmured one to

another, awed by her anger, which they could not comprehend, and dazzled by her beauty.

‘Get you gone, or the dog shall tear you!’ she said, with a passion that was the more intense because restrained. ‘The place is mine. I am here with my dead. Get you gone!’

‘Let us go,’ said the men to each other, and they did go, slowly, and looking back at her, and doubting still whether she were mortal, and, if mortal, mad.

‘Mad, surely!’ they said one to the other, and one of them added:

‘It is best to humour her. But we will go back again. She is beautiful. It must be she who owns the spinning wheel and the guitar.’

Left to herself she sat quite still, and hot tears gushed into her eyes.

‘Zirlo, Zirlo!’ she repeated. ‘And I loved him!’

There is no knife that cuts so sharply, and with such poisoned blade, as treachery.

Time went over her head uncounted. She sat there, lost in the intense pain that consumed her at this her first taste of

the bitter-sweet apple of human confidence and friendship.

She had trusted him and he had betrayed her.

It seemed to her that fire ought to descend from the skies and smite him, and burn up his little, weak, false, worthless life. She did not know that if this vengeance overtook human falsehood the skies would be for ever as a scroll in flames.

She sat there a long time motionless. Then she was seized with a deadly fear. Had they come for Joconda's body?

She went into the third chamber, and there she found the wooden coffin untouched, the flowers she had laid there undisturbed, and the lamp burning steadily.

She left it, and ascended the stairs, and looked over the moors.

The day was dying down, and the grand red glory of the west blinded her for a moment as she looked on it from the gloom of the tombs. There are no sunsets more gorgeous than those on the sea of the Maremma, and their pomp of gold and purple is a mockery of kings.

This day the gold was burning behind a transparent cloud of dusky blue, and the

scarlet, soft, yet intense as the colour of pomegranate flowers, glowed above it, and melted into the azure of the still shining skies. The moorlands were dark and hushed; the sea was the hue of the zenith.

She looked, and her eyes filled.

Then, far off, very far off, she saw a little dark figure, black against the ruby and the gold. All her rage sprang back into her heart, and she ground her teeth like a wolf. She wound her short and narrow skirt about her limbs, and with bare feet and bare shoulders leaped across the grass and ran like a greyhound.

He was half a mile off. In his babyish cunning he thought that if he were near at hand with his goats, she would think him innocent. Seeing her, across the moorland, coming towards him, swift and silent as the wind, his cunning deserted him, and his fear alone mastered him. He fled.

She gained on him nearer and nearer. No fawn of those wild meadows was swifter on her feet than she; she ran as the Greek girls ran of old in the arena, in the spring-time of their lives and of the year.

The dark elastic turf, the lightsome wood-moss, rebounded from her touch; she sprang

through the sunset glow of the air as the doe springs.

The boy, leaden-footed with terror, and not fully braced as she was to the movement of his limbs, tumbled forward rather than ran, and in his blind and palsied terror gained no ground, but stumbled round and round in a circle.

With every moment she drew nearer to him. He thought he felt her hands amidst his hair, her breath against his cheek, her steel upon his throat. He put the silver coins that were the price of his treachery between his teeth, and his teeth chattered so that he scarce could keep their hold upon the treasure for which he had lost his own soul and her trust and love. He ran on and on, falling forward in his terror, and plunging into watery grasses, slimy, and sinking under him. The glow faded, the sun had sunk to light the nether world. It was night ; still he ran on and on, and she ran in his wake. At last, as the moon rose above the distant hills, she reached him, and he fell prone under her grasp.

She stood over him, and to his terrified eyes she seemed to grow in stature and dilate until she touched the stars.

‘You betrayed my shelter!’ she said again, and her hands fell on his shoulders and she swayed him to and fro till the glittering vault of the night seemed to rock about him.

‘Oh, miserable!’ she cried to him; and the deep intense scorn of her voice seemed to roll like the notes of an organ over the solitary land. ‘You betrayed me for silver pieces as Judas betrayed his Lord! Do you know that I could kill you, you mean and wretched thing; you so small and so light, and I as strong as the buffalo? Do you know that I can dash out your brains on these stones, and hurl you dead into the sea, and wherefore should I not, you vile and faithless worm, viler than the adder and the newt?’

As she spoke she swung him backwards and forwards, and he was dumb and blind with horror; his eyes gazed up into the sky, but saw nothing.

He believed she would take his life.

‘I trusted you, I trusted you!’ she said to him; and it seemed to him as if her grasp were closing at his throat, and pressing the breath and the air and the life out of it.

An unutterable terror kept him mute and motionless; the whiteness of the moonlight shone on his ghastly little face, and its abject fear stung her to disgust, that made her rage seem too high an honour to so cowardly a thing.

She threw him off her some distance, so that he fell heavily on the turf.

‘You are a traitor!’ she said; and her voice rang loud through the night. ‘I will not hurt you. You are too vile. But come never in my sight. Breathe never the air I breathe. If you were dying, never would I lift a finger of mine to save you. I trusted you, you base, false, foolish, trembling thing, and you lost my trust for a silver coin! Oh you fool, oh you fool!’

Then little Zirlo, lying where she had flung him, saw her for a moment, seeming to him to touch the stars, and gather all their brilliancy about her hair and shoulders and luminous fire-flashing eyes, and the night appeared to snatch her up into itself, and a great darkness fell between them, and he was all alone.

Musa, convulsed with passion that was still but half spent, went slowly away from the spot through the luminous air, and

retraced her steps until once more she sat in the shadow of those solemn chambers which now were hers no more, but opened to the world of men.

A shudder of rage shook her from head to foot; then she bowed her head down upon her knees, and wept bitterly.

She had been betrayed.

Kinder than treachery is the knife that severs the cord of life.

It was her home, this temple of the dead, this sanctuary of the lonely moors that sheltered her and Joconda.

It was her home, and stood in the stead to her of all those ties and defences which surround the lives of other female creatures. Here she had been safe; her only visitants the timid hare, the friendly goat, the winter-burrowing lizard, and the night-birds that love gloom and silence.

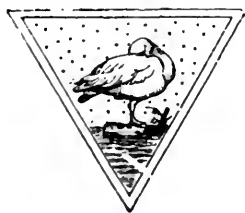
Now all that sweet calm sense of security was gone for ever. Strangers any day might come and disturb her and the dead in their tacit amity, and drive her, as they would drive the scops from his hole in a tree, or a fox from the refuge of the tombs. She knew nowhere else to go in all the world; she had no other home, no other friends.

The child knew that, and yet he had sold her for silver !

As she sat in the darkness of these chambers, where the moon-rays could not come, she wondered that she had not killed him.

What had held her hand ?

Not fear, of a surety, nor pity ; some awful sense of unutterable strength and scorn, set high above herself and him as the stars were, which had come upon her as she had gazed up into the brilliancy of the shining summer heavens.





CHAPTER XVII.

ON the following morning she was sitting outside the tombs, plaiting the *biodo*,¹ with her mind still darkened and her spirits still troubled by the treachery of Zefferino. Her rage had been like a styptic, and in a measure had cauterised the pain she felt, but it was sorrow as much as wrath that filled her heart this morning; she had been fond of the child and had trusted him, and he had sold for silver her secret, her peace, her safety; since all security for her depended, as she knew well, on no one being aware of the existence of the sepulchres.

It was, therefore, with heavy and anxious thoughts that she plaited on at her rushes in

¹ *Scirpus paludosus*.

the early day, whilst the bees buzzed about the yellow-flowered coronilla, and the jewel-like snakes crept harmlessly under the emerald leaves of the wake-robin.

Her worst fears took definite shape as, between her and the glory of the morning rays, pouring down over the mountains behind her, there came a human figure.

His back was to the sun and she could not discern his features, but there was that about him which made her sure it was one of those to whom Zirlo had sold her—the one who had spoken most to her.

Her first instinct was of flight, as it is that of all other moorland creatures at sight of an invader of their solitudes. Her next was a bolder one; she rose, thrust her plaiting down on the ground, and went forward to meet him. Her eyes blazed as they had done the night before; her teeth were set.

‘How dare you to come hither again?’ she shouted across the heather and the holy-thorn, the coronilla and broom, that parted him from her. ‘How dare you? I forbade you. This land belongs to me. Get you gone, or I will force you to repent of it.’

The stranger paused humbly and looked

at her over the golden flowers of the corolla and the broom.

‘May I speak one word to you?’ he said gently.

The man who drew near her was about thirty years old; he was tall and strongly made; his face was delicate and full of thought; it had not much beauty, except that which was due to the luminance of expression, and the colour and largeness, of his clear blue eyes. It was a physiognomy strange to her, for it was entirely northern.

He came on as quickly as the prickly shrubs, and the creepers that laced them together, would allow him to do. He was looking at her with an expression of keen interest, and she stood awaiting him with knitted brows and dark suspicious glances, ankle-deep in cinquefoil and saintfoin.

‘Are you not she whom the shore people call the Velia and the Musoncella?’

‘Yes,’ she answered angrily; ‘what is that to you?’

‘It is much,’ he said gently, being as fearful of her taking flight ere she could hear him as the bird-catcher is of alarming the lapwing when it is turning its crested head

in innocent curiosity to the nets he spreads. 'It is much. I will tell you who I am—I am the grandson of Joachim Sanctis.'

All the rage and the imperious scorn went out of her face; she was amazed and awed.

'You are of *her* people!' she said under her breath; then, with the lapwing's caution, she drew back her momentarily awakened sympathies.

'Maybe you only lie,' she said with impatience. 'Any one on the shore knows that I lived with Joconda. It is very easy to say this; and you crept into my house yesterday while I was away as a fox creeps into the moorhen's nest when she is absent.'

'I am no fox, indeed,' he said with a faint smile, 'and I mean you nothing but friendliness. Here is Joconda's letter, written to Joachim, who has been dead five and thirty years and more, when I was not born myself.'

Across the morning light and the amber blossoms she glanced at the letter which the public letter-writer had penned in ceremonious and very flowery language; but she did not take it.

‘I knew nothing about the letter,’ she said suspiciously. ‘And how did you come to have it. It was not written to you.’

‘No ; it was written to my grandfather and his brother. Both are dead. All are dead of her generation. There is a bailiff in the farmhouse she knew. The letter went to the priest down at Cogne, and he sent it on to me. But I was in Asia, and never received it till this spring, when I returned from the East ; and when, as I landed at Naples, I got it, I resolved to come and see you and Joconda. At Santa Tarsilla I heard of her death, and of you no one could tell me anything. I have roamed about your Maremma to look for you. Yesterday, a friend who travelled with me wanted to find out these tombs ; and when I saw you I felt sure that you were the “Musa” of Joconda’s letter, only I would not speak before the other man. I slept up at a wretched place, San Lionardo, and at sunrise came to see you. That is all. I do not know why you should doubt me.’

She was silent, unconvinced, yet a little touched by his words and troubled at the thought that one of her dead friend’s blood should be living and standing before her.

‘Why did you look for me?’ she said curtly.

‘The letter asked Joachim to befriend you if she died; I thought I ought to do what he would have done.’

‘That was kind.’

‘If it were I have more than my reward.’

The flattery passed by her unseen, making no more imprint than the dew as it rolls off a cabbage-leaf.

‘I do not see why you should care,’ she said at length; meaning what she said.

‘But I did care,’ he said with some anger. He did not add, ‘because Joconda said that you were beautiful, and alone, and I love all beautiful things, and I pity all lonely ones.’

She stood silent, looking at him, musing.

‘Come to her,’ she said abruptly and yet with a great tenderness in her voice; and she motioned him to follow her into the chamber where the coffin of poplar-wood lay in the twilight of mother earth.

She knelt down by it and kissed the rough wood.

‘Dear and good friend,’ she murmured,

‘canst thou not hear? Thy people forgot thee so long, but at last they have repented and remembered.’

Then, kneeling still, she prayed in Latin, as she had been taught, to the God who was to her a vast, unknown, incomprehensible Spirit brooding on the face of the waters and smiling with the sunbeams of the morning.

Maurice Sanctis felt his eyes grow moist, and he bent his knee beside her; though for prayer and paternoster he had the easy scorn of a modern student, yet for the old faith that moved the simple hearts of the women of his family he kept a reverent indulgence.

When Musa rose her face had grown tender, and had lost the suspicion and the impatience with which she had received him. He seized that moment of softer feeling to draw from her some account of how she lived there, and why, and of how her early years had passed in Joconda’s house.

She told him, simply and frankly, having nothing to conceal; and unconscious of how her narrative made her short history stand before his mind’s eye in as bold and pure and heroic lines as those of a Parthenaic frieze. What added to his interest was his

own knowledge of the blood of Saturnino that ran in her veins, her parentage having been written by Joconda's scribe on a separate page that he had not offered to her. From the dragon had come forth, not indeed a dove, but a white-winged curlew, strong alike on sea and moor.

'But how is her coffin here?' he asked with surprise, after long silence.

She told him how she had brought it there.

He listened with emotion.

'You are as faithful as a dog,' he said; 'it is not southern, such constancy.'

She did not understand; she knew nothing of any divisions and races of men.

'Do you not think she would have wished to be with me?' she said, anxiously.

'I am sure that she would. Who of us all cares to lie alone in the black earth with the worms? You loved her much, it seems?'

'She was good, and I was too thankless. I know it now; now it is of no use.'

'My poor child! We all feel that when we have lost what served us. When my father lay dead before me I seemed to myself to have been a very brute, living all for

my own aims and pleasures in Paris, not giving a thought to the old man by the lake, who would fain have had me live all my life where I could look upon Mont Blanc; and very likely I shall go and live there ere I die. When you are mountain-born you use cities, you do not love them.'

'Is Paris a city?' she asked.

'The city of cities.'

'Where is it? Is it far from here?'

'Will you come with me and see it?'

He spoke half in jest, half in earnest. She took the question literally, without its seeming strange to her.

'I would never go where roofs lie close together,' she said; 'how can the people bear it? always breathing others' breath instead of the honey-smell of the flowers.'

'It is a false taste; like choosing wine rather than water. So you are wedded to your Maremmano moors?'

'I love Maremma,' she answered him, slowly; for she had never been called on to analyse and express what she felt. Then she added:

'Where is that other gone who was with you?'

'He is gone back to Genoa, to go to

Vienna, where he lives. Did he please you, that you ask?’

‘Please me! I am only afraid that he may come back, or tell others of these tombs. I wish that you did not know of them.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it is the solitude that I care for, and if people know of them, travellers will come and look; they do wherever there are *buche delle fate*; and if the shepherds find it out they will drive me away and stable themselves in my stead; it would be much better for a shepherd than his hut, because in storms and very cold nights he could drive his flock in with him.’

Sanctis gazed at her in amazement.

‘But—but you do not mean that you think in all seriousness of staying here all your life long?’

‘That is what I hope to do.’

‘Good God! Have you no other dream for your future?’

Musa knitted her brows angrily.

‘What better can there be? I have all I want. I can maintain myself very well. I am in the midst of the birds, and of the beasts. There is the air in my mouth, the

wind on my face, whenever I choose. I am content. In summer time it is too hot perhaps, and they say the steam of the marshes is bad to breathe, though never has it hurt me; but to live here is good, so good! I do not know what cities may be like, but I know that I will never go to one. Men and women make me angry, cruel, wicked; I never am with them that they do not; they are so mean, they are so cowardly, they are so greedy. But here I am content, and I think, wherever she is, she is content with me.'

Maurice Sanctis was silent; he was moved by that intense and reverent remembrance of the dead woman; he was bewildered at this creature's absolute ignorance of her own physical charm, and of the passions and the hopes that agitate humanity, and illuminate for youth its visions of love. He was loth to disturb her repose. Besides, he saw that he would speak to her in an unknown tongue; he saw that she was a child entirely in thought and feeling.

The early hours of the morning grew warmer, and the noon chimes swung drowsily in many a belfry in little villages upon the shore and on the plains; Sanctis remained there in the shadow of the burial

place, breaking his fast with her oaten bread, and drinking the spring water from the ivory-handled *rhyton* that had served the funeral feasts of the dead Lucumo.

Musa had resumed her plaiting of the *biodo*, and was all the while longing for him to be gone. He was sacred to her, but he was not welcome; and all the while, also, the treachery of the little curly cherub-faced Zirlo was heavy at her heart.

He had sold her for a silver piece!

As she plaited she had a rebellious and unwilling look, as if this stranger held her captive instead of being but a visitor there; a guest, sharing her bread. She was vaguely distrustful of him; his hands were so white, his linen so fine.

‘Joconda was poor,’ she said, abruptly; ‘you are not a poor man.’

‘No, I am not. Anton, the son of Joachim—named after his brother Anton—went to live in Geneva, and owned small craft upon the lake. He throve, and earned bigger boats, and built them for himself, and at last became owner of lake-steamers, and made much money. He was a simple hard-living man to the last, and saved all the money he made. I am his only son; I

inherited all he had, years since. I myself am a painter of pictures, and live in Paris. Men call me famous, but I do not think I am worth as much as were Anton and Joachim. Now,' he continued, almost solemnly, 'will you not come with me? My dear, do not be afraid; you will be sacred to me beyond everything. I will take you to sisters of mine, who live upon our lake in such a green wooded place; in spring it is a bower of apple and pear blossom, and rosy chestnut flowers. I swear by that good dead woman, whom her kin forsook and you have cherished, that we will be tenderness itself to you, and make your life a fairy story. Now, answer me, you will come? I do not ask you to come to a city; you will come to mountains grander than yours, and to wider waters and healthier winds.'

'All these words are very well,' said Musa, with scorn; 'but why did you all let her live and die alone?'

'It was wrong,' said Sanctis; 'but mine was not the blame, nor was it my father's. Joachim and Anton had hated and opposed her marriage, and in later times resented her silence. For want of a word lives often drift apart.'

‘Was not a Maremmano mariner as good as a cowkeeper in Savoy?’ said Musa, with continuous contempt.

‘It was the antagonism of races; our people came from Glarus, and were of a Teuton stock,’ said Sanctis; and then remembered that he was talking in an unknown tongue to his companion. He added quickly, ‘I am very sorry that we let her live so. But to me she was only a vague name, she belonged to such a distant time; even my grandfather Joachim I never saw.’

She was mute. She was angered with his intrusion on her solitude, and she was resentful of that long neglect under which Joconda had lived through so hard a life to pass away in so lonely a death.

If he had been a shepherd, or a herdsman, or a rude sailor, he might have awakened her sympathies; but there was about him the atmosphere, as it were, of another world than hers: a sort of look of ease, of culture, of success, of all things which were beyond her comprehension, yet which alienated her.

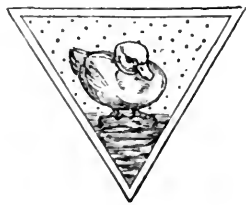
He could not prevail on her to listen, nor on himself to give up so easily what the dead woman’s letter had entreated her brethren

to do. He stayed a few days at Telamone, at the wretched little wine-house which was all the accommodation it could afford, and hired a little felucca and sailed along the coast to the Sasso Scritto, and thence, most days, walked inland to the tombs. This displeased her, and she made him feel it, though she checked many a harsh word unuttered because he was of Joconda's kindred.

He meekly asked her permission to finish his sketches of the sepulchres, and she gave it reluctantly, suspicious of a stranger's entrance in those solitudes.

Often when he arrived there to go on with his careful drawings of the walls, he found the place silent and empty; she was away, gone over the moors which she knew so well, and in whose mazes of vegetation it was hopeless for him to follow her. She avoided him; he was alien to her, he was outside the pale of her sympathies; she had more friendship for a sheldrake plunging and splashing amongst the pond-lilies, for a porcupine or a hedgehog creeping on its careful excursions under the giant fennel. She vaguely felt, as the gipsy feels it in the stranger who accosts him, that he desired to take her away from all this freedom. She did not

know the world he came from, but she hated it without knowing it ; a world where the roofs were close together, and the birds were in cages, and the free air of heaven was feared ; that was what she thought it, and she was afraid lest he should in any way compel her to go to it. She did not think he would betray her, because he had Joconda's clear blue eyes ; but she did not breathe freely where he was ; it seemed to her that he wanted to take her as the bird-snarers took the poor stream-swallows, to carry them into cities and sell them, to have a thread tied about their foot for house-diversion.





CHAPTER XVIII.

ONCE or twice he met her upon the shore, and she gave him a curt word or two, and pushed her boat out into the water and sculled herself out of sight. He was unwilling to alarm or to scare her by too close pursuit, and he began to feel that his journey here would be fruitless. He was a man of honest purpose and clear conscience ; he was incapable of wronging, even by a wish, a child bequeathed to the mercy of his people by a dead woman, but he began to grow dissatisfied and angry with his failure. He had obtained some rare drawings of an un-mutilated tomb of Etruria ; and this was the sole result that seemed likely to accrue to him from the waste of a midsummer month.

The air, too, which gives 'distemper if not death' to the stranger, began to work its evil way on him. He began to lose strength, to feel chilly, to have a touch of fever; the burning suns on the rank soil began to pour their poison into his northern blood. She met him on the twelfth day of his stay at Telamone as she came home towards sunset with wild strawberries and blackberries as her afternoon's gleanings.

She looked at him and smiled a little.

'Maremma makes you ill,' she said with unconcealed contentment; 'you are very unwise to stay in it. The sun is always angry with strangers. Why do you not go away?'

'Dear, you know very well why I stay,' said Sanctis gently and with humility. 'I cannot bear to leave you here, all alone, in so utter a solitude, in so wild a life.'

She frowned impatiently.

'That is not for you to think about; myself I would not live elsewhere. It is foolish of you to stay on at Telamone. You may stay twelve weeks, twelve months, twelve years, and you will not make me live in any other way than I do. You will only lose your own health.'

‘You will lose yours. All the people are sickly——’

‘They are sickly chiefly because they are dirty. The heats never hurt me; I bathe twice a day. But strangers are always ill here. If they wait too long, they die.’

‘Do you wish that I should die?’

‘No; I do not. That is why I tell you to go away while it is time. If you stay much longer the fever will get in your blood, in your bones, it will be like fire inside you, and your limbs will feel to you no better than the dry empty canes in autumn. The fever has never touched me, but I have seen it often; and then there is the ague that comes with it, and you shiver as if you were up to your throat in snow, though the air is like the blast of an oven round you. It will be a pity if you wait for that. You will never be the same man again after it, even if you do throw it off you in time.’

‘But why are you so well here?’

‘I do not know. Why are the roebucks well, and the boars, and the hares? I and they belong to the soil; you are a stranger.’

She belonged to the soil; she was one of those Etruscan Mastarna who had dwelt on the slopes of the Apennines for so many generations. He thought, as he looked at her, should he tell her that she was the daughter of Saturnino, would it make any change in her? Would it render her more willing to come away from a land soaked with the blood of her father's prey? No; he thought she would only cling more closely there if she learned that one of her race was in chains upon these shores; and she was so calm, so bold, so innocent, so proud, he had not the heart to say to her—'the man who stole your gold is the man who gave you your life.'

He let her go home with her summer fruits, and himself returned to the dreary and unhealthy shore.

He had the hand of a painter, but he had the heart of a mountaineer. What he loved best were the rush of ice-fed waters, the stillness of the great glaciers, the rarefied air of the peaks and domes that towered above the earth-hiding clouds. This sea-coast in summer was loathsome to him, even whilst his eyes saw and his soul acknowledged the lovely light on its amethystine hills, the

transparent wonder of its distances, the rose and the gold of its daybreak.

The enervating atmosphere seemed to steal the strength from his sinews like Delilah ; the squalor and the sickness in the clustered hovels that were called a town made him weary and depressed ; he grew ill, as Musa had told him that he would do ; he began angrily to feel that it was of no use to lose his time and his powers only to force on an unwilling ear what was unwelcome, only to try and offer safety and ease to one who scorned the one and could not understand the other.

It seemed to him that it was his duty to compel this lonely child to accept the succour and the asylum whose benefit she could not comprehend ; but then duty could only be done by means that would be base. He must resort to that betrayal of her which would seem to her most vile. He must state what he knew of her to the civic authorities of Grosseto ; he must set at work against her the machineries of that law against which Saturnino's life had been one long revolt. He must publish to her and every one that story of her birth which the rude tenderness of Joconda had so carefully con-

cealed. The law would have to take her for him as the decoy took the field-birds, and when that was done he could show no right to her; Joconda's letter would be nothing before the law, and the Musoncella would be only to them the love-child of a galley-slave, to be thrust into some public institute at best, and forced into some social groove without regard to how that pressure hurt or drove her desperate. Very possibly the law would only treat her as a nomad, as a vagabond, and he himself could have no standing-point of legal right from which to oblige her to receive his benefits.

What could he do? It was a difficulty which perplexed and began to sadden him.

This creature, who seemed to him so beautiful, so fearless, and so redundant of animated life that she appeared a very incarnation of Artemis, was happy as she now was, innocent as the wild doe of her own oak-glades, and bold enough to defend her innocence were it menaced.

Would not interference with her do more harm than good?

He knew the danger that accompanies meddlers, and he was of too modest a temper to be sure of his own wisdom. He

had no hold on her ; that he felt. He might as well have tried to make the wild doe sit by his side.

He knew the force of hereditary instincts, the strange and subtle influence of descent. He knew that though the soul of the Tzigane is full of music, and full of music are his hands and his heart, yet if you try to teach him the science of sound and make him play from written notes he is dumb ; his very soul dies in him. So he felt that with her would it be impossible to take her from the melody of the woods and the waters, to set her down amidst conventional life.

Had she been dissatisfied and restless and ashamed, he could have moved her easily to some ambition, some curiosity ; but before this absolute tranquillity of content, this fierce repudiation of any possible better thing, he was helpless. It was the content of the pastoral Greek, the content of the Bedouin Arab. It was a kingdom in itself, and a kingdom not easily invaded or impaired. It was like the invisible line drawn by the magician—no step could pass it, no adamant could oppose a barrier as strong.

She had aroused a strong pity within him, and had a seduction for him in that classic

charm which hung about her as its fragrance clings to the dried calycanthus.

He would willingly, without a single selfish motive or ignoble thought, have done for her at any cost any service ; but since she only saw in the outstretched hand of friendship the grasp of the gaoler, he knew not what to do.

‘ I am near my end ; save the child from the sins she has inherited, from the loneliness in which I leave her,’ Joconda had written to her brothers ; and this their descendant was almost morbidly anxious to fulfil her prayer. When he had received that letter sent by a dead woman to his father’s father, his imagination had been stirred by the few words that spoke with a yearning fear of this storm-bird on the southern seashore.

He was rich in most of the blessings of life, and his name was already illustrious ; love of the arts lent their beauty to his days, and wherever he went men welcomed him.

He was a man often lonely amidst troops of friends, and a man to whom the thought of duty was not irksome but readily welcome. It had seemed to him so simple a thing to

give a home amongst his kindred to a child who was all alone on earth. Pity and a chivalrous charity had been at work in him, but he found himself before a young Amazon who would have nothing at his hands, an Atalanta whom no golden apple would tempt.

It was midsummer, and the miasma of the country began, as she had said, to steal the health out of his face and the marrow out of his bones. It was time also for him to be beside the high Biscayan waves on the west coast of France, where he had promised to paint the frescoes of a great gallery in a friend's Breton castle. Thinking, alone, in the hot nights as the sails of the tartane grew silvery under the moon, and the lights of the fishing-boats glimmered in the deep blue of the night, he reluctantly came to the conclusion with a sigh that his greatest, his only possible, kindness was to leave her to herself.

The conviction wounded his conscience and hurt his self-love, of which, however, he had less than most people ; but to do otherwise he would needs be harsh and treacherous. He could not bring himself to be either ; it seemed to him that she was the last of the

hamadryads, and he could not bring himself to be the one who should snatch her from her mossy couch and canopy of leaves to drag her into the fictitious wants, the artificial customs, and the, always in a measure, vulgar strife of human life in modern days.

Her manner of existence was like nothing else now on earth ; it was like that of a young priestess of Fauna or of Pales in the Golden Age. He could not forcibly disturb it any more than he, of a humane and a poetic nature, could have plucked out of the reeds the little blue warblers' nest in the season of their love and in the spring-time of the year. Would she have come willingly, willingly would he have run all risks of misconstruction and ridicule from his fellows to do her loyal service in any way she chose. But he could not use against her the pricks and bands of that civil law of whose very name she knew nothing : a law always cruel in all lands to the homeless wanderer and to the offspring of a criminal.

The law would not see, as he saw, the innocence and beauty of that woodland life, of that tender fidelity to dead Joconda, of that serene independence of the help of man.

She would seem to the law no more than any one of the hill-foxes that burrowed under the centaury and cinquefoil of some fern-grown bank.

True, in this land the pastoral life has been more general and more honoured than in any other; the shepherd still lives under his conical reed-thatched hut, the cattle-keeper still camps out amidst his bullocks and his horses on the thyme-sweet plains; their lives are much the same as that of the peasants of old who looked for the Pleiades as the bringers of spring, and saw, in the great Constellation of the North, oxen drawing the corn-wains of the gods across the sky. True, Maremma was so lonely, so wide, so virgin in its water-fed greenery, so severed by its season of disease from all the moving world, that such a life here was less strange than it would have been elsewhere, and the native mountaineer in the hillside woods, and the shepherd from the north on the rich grasslands, were nomads as utterly as ever were their forefathers in days when Pan and Faunus were the gods of the forest and pasture.

They would have understood well enough that the tombs made a good dwelling-place,

and that any one with eye and ear trained to the sights and the sounds of the moors and the woods could, without much hardship, find enough from them to hold body and soul together. On the lonely mountain-sides of Italy many still live as simply as S. Francesco did upon Alvernia ; their only bread what the wild oats give, their only esculent the fungi that grow about the roots of the holm-oaks, their only wine the spring that bubbles up amongst the water-cress.

But to Maurice Sanctis, fresh from the world of civilisation and culture, with its infinite multiplication of needs and desires, it appeared terrible for a woman who was scarcely more than a child to dwell thus, to be alone in the winter nights, to face the privations of the winter weather, to be dependent on her own strength of limb and surety of eye for all her maintenance, to have neither dream nor desire of any other life than this, which was no higher than the deer's in the moorlands, the flamingo's in the willowy swamps.

With daybreak on the fifteenth morning of his fruitless stay at sorrowful Telamone he went to speak to her, if he could, for the last time. He had the good fortune to find

her as she was returning to the tombs with a load of freshly-cut chair-maker's rush put on the back of the mule. Her hands were quick and clever at the plaiting of the reeds, and wove rude matting and baskets with care and skill. She did not know how she should be able to sell them now that she had no more the assistance of Zirlo ; but she continued to make them, and meant, when she had made enough to fill a boat, to sail with them to some place on the coast where she was not known and barter them herself for shoes, and flax, and other necessary things. Of clothing and linen she had still a good store, for Joconda had laid by much of the cloth she wove, and the stout hand-woven stuff was tough and lasted long even in the wear and tear of Musa's open-air life.

She saw Sanctis approach with a frown on her straight brows and no greeting on her lips. He wearied her ; he importuned her ; he rendered her angry and impatient.

Her life was good in her own sight ; she could not see why he should want to interfere with it.

On this last day he argued with her almost passionately for a man so calm of

temper. He offered her that alpine farm facing the Grand Paradis where the girlhood of Joconda had been spent. He told her, if any thought of cities and of cultured life appalled her, she should have nothing of either; she should dwell there, under the glaciers, as free as any chamois, and since she had so proud and resolute a spirit she should owe him nothing, but maintain herself by her spinning or by any other work she chose. Only, if she would but come thither she would be safe; she would be no longer alone, she would be with good women, and the last wishes of Joconda would be fulfilled.

But Musa only laughed, deep down in her starry blue-black eyes.

‘A Sicilian asked me the other day to go to his island,’ she answered him; ‘and he was a sailor, and he had a fast-sailing brig; and if there be a thing that I would care to have it is a vessel of any sort. But I said to him what I will say to you—I will not go from Maremma.’

‘And how did he ask you to go with him?’

‘Oh, he said he would marry me,’ said Musa, indifferently. ‘He owned the ship,

and she was a fast and a good one; but I would not go.'

'A sailor is seldom to be trusted in such invitations,' said Sanctis, with some irritation. 'He makes them in most ports. What I offer you, my poor child, is very different; you should go to good women, to peace and safety and comfort, to knowledge and light and the grace of life. You are as beautiful as a young goddess, but you are as wild and untamed as a kestrel. What I want to do is what Joconda would have wished to have done for you. My dear, is it possible you mistrust me?'

'I neither trust nor mistrust you,' said Musa, a little angrily. 'I do not think about it, because I do not want anything that you offer me. I shall not leave Maremma.'

Sanctis was silent and baffled. He had no means by which to control or coerce, and it began to seem impossible to persuade her.

The northern mind was in him, all artist though he was; order, security, education, protection, seemed to him the very breath of life to any female creature; the liberty, the loneliness, the indifference to

the future, the ways of living like any bird or beast of the moors, which were so good in Musa's eyes, were intolerable to him. He sympathised with her passion for her strange dwelling-place as little as the Hollander can sympathise with the Bedouin.

He was a great painter, but his creations were cold, clear, classic, faultless, full of intellect; and even in the colour and movement of Parisian life the influences of the stiff, serene, precise routine of the Swiss home of his boyhood had never entirely left him.

Musa, with her lovely face and her noble regard, had fascinated him, and a pity, so intense as to be pain, had moved him for the child of Saturnino, whose birth-history he knew, though she did not know it. But his pity was rejected, and a certain anger began to grow up in him.

Why should I trouble about her?' he thought; 'she has wild blood in her; doubtless a wild life suits her; and doubtless, too, to take her to that tranquil home on the Lake of Geneva would be to loose a tornado in a greenhouse; yet it is horrible that she should be left here to go to ruin, body and soul, as she must do.'

So he urged her again and again. It seemed his duty, and it was also his desire ; he was a man of noble temperament, he had no sinister thought ; he meant to do for her what Joconda would have wished done ; more, if possible. She seemed so young and so intelligent that he thought there would be little difficulty to make of her a grand and thoughtful woman, although he knew that it is hard to tame the nightingale that has had a single year in the woods ; so hard that it dies under the effort.

With all the eloquence that sincere longing to succeed could inspire in him, he used every argument he could think of to shake her resolution, and induce her to trust herself to another land and to another life. But it was utterly in vain.

Musa heard him more or less patiently, but his persuasions passed over her head as if they were thistle-down flying on a breeze.

‘Go and see if you can drive a grey-lag goose¹ into your poultry-byre,’ she said once, with a little low laugh ; ‘do you think you can ? You know nothing of wild birds’

¹ The *anser cineræus* which migrates here in winter ; not of course the *chens hyperboreus*.

ways? More pity. Well, I will tell you. The wild goose will very likely walk and fly with your tame ones when they are out on the open grass lands; perhaps he will even go with them part of their road home; but never will you get him to enter with them. Never. When he sees a house-wall he gets up upon his wings and goes away upon the air.'

He saw that he had no effect upon her, took no more hold on her than the water takes upon the glossy laurel leaf, or the plumes of the coot.

'Let her stay!' he thought, angrily; 'she will go away with the Sicilian sailor, no doubt, sooner or later; she will be happier so than amidst culture and repose.'

His heart revolted from leaving her here all alone in the twilight of the sepulchres, and upon the wildness and vastness of the moors. But he saw that if he pressed her more she would very likely say nothing, but go and hide; that if he remained in the Maremma to return and urge her afresh she would very likely on the morrow be flown, as the hunted snipe flies to new willows and to strange waters, thinking its familiar pool deceived it.

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He felt that if she did not distrust him she had no friendliness for him.

She had brought him the clear spring water in the graceful rhyton, and tendered it to him with a pile of wood strawberries and a loaf of her own oaten bread, because she had nothing else to give; but he felt that the hospitality was always for the sake of dead Joconda, and her tolerance of his presence due to the same cause.

‘Since you cared for Joconda, you should have some kindness for me,’ he said with a sigh.

‘You do not recall her to me, though I believe what you say,’ she answered him. ‘She was so poor, so sad of heart.’

‘I am neither, thank heaven,’ said Sanctis. ‘But it is no merit of mine; my father amassed wealth as I have told you, and I am able to walk in the sunshine and give my years to art.’

‘That is no fault,’ said Musa. ‘But yet one does not care for it.’

‘I never knew any one who was well off,’ she added after awhile. ‘It does not seem right; why should you not work as every one does in Maremma?’

‘I work in my own way.’

‘To do what you like—that is not work.’

‘You are very stern and harsh,’ he said with a smile, as he looked at her Antinous-like face, which it seemed to him the lotus-flowers of love and dreamful ease should crown. ‘We must not quarrel, for Jaconda’s sake.’

‘No.’

‘Is there nothing I can do for you?’

‘There is one thing, but you will not like me to say it, perhaps.’

‘Yes, say it. Whatever it may be I will do it.’

‘I should be glad if you would go away; that is what would please me.’

He was silent and chagrined.

‘In this brief time have I made myself so offensive?’ he exclaimed bitterly.

‘Oh, no,’ said Musa, a little eagerly, for she did not wish to pain him. ‘I have no dislike to you; you are one of her people; that is enough for me. But I shall be glad if you will go. In the first place it teases me to talk to you. Your Italian is not what we use in Maremma; it may be better, I dare say, but it is not ours; and then, if you go on living anywhere near and come

to see me here, somebody on the moors will be certain to observe it, and then they will find out these tombs, and, as I have said to you, the shepherds will come.'

It was so long a speech for her that she drew a deep breath of fatigue after making it. She did not wish to be harsh to Jaconda's relative, but she intensely desired him to be gone from Maremma.

Sanctis was mortified and discomfited. She had taken a strong hold on his imagination; also on his pity. She was like nothing he had ever seen, and he could get no hold in return upon her mind. It was closed to him. He was sure that she would never give him a remembrance if he did as she wished, and left Maremma.

'But to leave you thus now, once I have known you,' he said, almost timidly; 'that hurts me and troubles me. You are content in it, but indeed it is not a life for a woman.'

Musa laughed a little, low in her throat.

'It is a life for *me*, just as it is a life for the moor-hen and the stream-swallow.'

'But it is dangerous——'

'Not for me. I can hide as the mole

does, and I can fight as the mole can ; I am never without my knife.'

The fierce fire of Saturnino's eyes glowed for a moment in hers ; her nostrils dilated, her lips smiled, her breath came quickly, there was blood in her veins that was warm as wine at the vision of conflict.

'Oh, I do not doubt your courage,' said Sanctis ; and paused, hesitating how he could awaken this savage innocence to a sense of its own true peril. He felt a momentary shudder go over him at the glance that her eyes gave ; he seemed to see the panther in her, as the Greek sailors saw it in the young god Dionysus, when he leapt and rent the garland from the mast.

'If I could but persuade you,' he said, with the timidity she was quick to hear in his voice.

'But you cannot,' she said, rudely. 'Do not make me angry ; I do not wish to part with you in anger, for Joconda's sake. But you would never persuade me if you stayed a thousand years ; you would only drive me away up into the hills ; for if I were not alone here, this place would be nothing to me. If it be true that you wish to please me—go.'

His face flushed ; a deep discomfiture and mortification filled him as he heard. He tore a leaf out of his note-book, wrote on it and laid it down beside her.

‘That is where I live,’ he said to her ; ‘if ever you want me, send there ; I will be here as soon as steam can bring me.’

‘Why should I want you?’ said Musa, with unconscious cruelty of wonder. ‘I thank you for your thought of me ; but I need nothing.’

‘You may, some day.’

She shook her head.

‘What I cannot get myself, I go without. The sun will be soon setting. You will lose your way on the moors, if you do not set out at once.’

‘You are hard of heart, Musa.’

‘I am the Musoncella,’ she said with a little smile.

‘Will you not say a kinder word at parting? I came out of goodwill.’

‘Of that I am sure. God speed you.’

Then she turned away from him, and began to walk back towards the tombs.

He looked after her while the clematis vitalba, that made a thick screen all around the place as it clung to the shrubs and trees,

enclosed her in its starry veil, and shut her from his view.

‘The virgin’s bower,’ he thought, as the peasant’s name for the parasite of the woods came on his mind. ‘May she be safe in it!’

But his fears were with her though his anger would fain have extinguished them.

‘She is only a savage wild creature as the *dondola* of her moorland is,’ he said to himself, as he walked through the blossoming ling which the slanting sun-rays made into ‘a path of gold.’ But he could not persuade himself that she was only this; he could not banish from his sight the face that was fit for the young Cleopatra’s; he could not forgive himself for having missed the way to fulfil Joconda’s wishes. Yet his conscience was blameless.

The fault was not his.

She was a pomegranate-flower blooming in the wilderness; a paradise-bird captive in a cellar. He felt a fool, and guilty, because he had been unable to gather the flower, and too weak to persuade the bird that liberty and light were without.

After him Musa did not look back.

She descended into her shadowy home and called the old dog to her.

‘Oh, Leone, how good it is to be alone!’ she said with a smile on her mouth; then the smile faded and the darkness of wrath and of scorn came upon her face.

‘The little asp that bit me by betrayal!’ she said bitterly between her teeth.

For never would she feel quite safe again. She was always on the watch for some strange face, some strange step; and the loss of little Zirlo and the sense of his treachery weighed on her. It was her first experience of the human curse.

The little, chattering, good-humoured, selfish boy had been welcome to her at all times. They had blent their young voices together in many a lay of sea and shore; they had been mirthful about nothing, as it is the privilege of childhood to be. Zirlo, trotting to and fro between the mountains and the moors, had been the one note of gaiety, the one touch of affection, which had allied her with that common humanity which she often hated, oftener despised, and always pitied.





CHAPTER XIX.



FORTNIGHT, or a little more, after that curt farewell to Maurice Sanctis, when she was out cutting osiers far away from the tombs, the mule was stolen. When she came home, to fetch him to carry the osiers for her, he was missing from the stable she had made for him in the tombs with a cosy litter of moss and ling, and a plentiful ration of wild oats and grass. He was missing; and she knew in a moment that he had been stolen. He could not have slipped his halter and opened the stone doors himself.

‘It is Zirlo!’ she said between her tight-shut lips. It could be no other than Zirlo.

She went out and saw the wet sand marked with the fresh impress of two little

naked feet and the four hoofs of the mule. She tracked them till nightfall over the moors and through the shrubs, but night soon fell over the land and then she could see nothing. She returned, and could not sleep, thinking of the poor old animal gone to unknown misery in hard toil and strange hands.

She remained wide awake, listening to the delicious song of the nightingales that came from every knot of thyme and clump of rosemary, crossed discordantly now and again by the croak of the snipe, the mourning of the owl, the scream of the coot seized by the fox.

At dawn she looked for the tracks again, but they were effaced by the dew.

With full daybreak she went across the country to San Lionardo, where it stood naked and white upon its low spur of the Apennines. She had never been there, but she ran all risks rather than not see Zirlo and find the mule. It was three hours' walk, and most of it was climbing work; but she reached there as the sun, that had long been up over the Umbrian pastures and Adrian shores of the east, first reached the dreary little hamlet hidden in the rocks.

She asked for the house of Zefferino the *pastorino*, and went straight to it. It was a foul-smelling place, reeking of garlic and stable filth; she saw the father of Zefferino, who was eating an onion and throwing young boughs into a manger for cows.

‘Zirlo has stolen my mule,’ she said abruptly. ‘I am come to you to have it back.’

‘You are a bold one, whoever you are,’ said the man. ‘Why do you think he has robbed you?’

‘Because the mule is gone, and he alone knew where I kept it; and because he is a false and wicked creature, and did me a treachery but a few days ago; and I spared him then, and I was foolish——’

‘Oh ho!’ said the man, ‘my little lad has told me about you; you are a gipsy, and a witch, and worse, and you live in the bowels of the earth, and some fine night we will come and smoke you out. As for your spavined beast, I know nought of it, and Zefferino is gone away to Bolsena to his mother’s folk who are fishers there, for he was afraid for his life to remain where you could get at him——’

‘Then he has taken the mule to Bolsena!’

‘No, no; your mule be burnt! My little lad went away with a good *sensale*——’

‘To whom he has sold it!’ she cried, beside herself with powerless rage.

The man’s face turned red, but he only swore at her.

‘If you say more about that, I will say something to you,’ he said savagely. ‘Who stole the gold out of the tombs? The tombs were ours as much as yours.’

‘I stole nothing,’ said Musa; ‘but your little liar has robbed me of my mule, and you know it very well, and you have the *sensale*’s silver in your house now, and you are all of you wicked and accursed; and sooner would I that you had cut off my right arm rather than that you had taken that poor beast to misery in its old age.’

She felt a sob choke her as she spoke, thinking of the patient beast that she had known and cared for all her life, and of the baseness and the vileness with which the child she had trusted had rewarded her trust.

She knew her own impotence. She could prove nothing, and she was full sure that Zirlo and the dealer were far away—no

doubt in some direction the most opposite to the great lake, since this wretch had named Bolsena. She was too proud and too strong to protest when she was powerless to avenge. She turned away and went down the steep street of San Lionardo, roughly paven with rough granite of the mountain.

‘We will come and smoke you out some night, as we do the foxes,’ yelled the father of Zefferino after her, and muttered to his cow and his pipe, ‘They say there were bags full of the Austrians’ gold florins in those caves. Zirlo was sure there were none left, else a knife across her throat——’

Happily for her and for himself, he was a very lazy man, and munched on at his big onion without going after her to try the persuasion of his knife.

Musa scarcely saw the mountain side as she descended it for the mist of passionate sorrow that blinded her eyes. The menace to herself passed her ear unheeded ; what she grieved for, what she saw in her thoughts, was the poor old mule plodding far away over cruel, stony roads, with no one to give him a draught of water, or pull for him a handful of grass, taken in his old age to the torture-loads of the Carrara marbles, or to the

hard labour of the *bindolo* or water-crank, or to those brutal taskmasters, the charcoal burners, who compel their beasts to sleep standing, and kick them up if they dare to lie down, and drive them night and day with the black loads from the forests in long pitiless journeys over stone and sand to the gates of cities.

Poor old Cecco! Never more would he have his fragrant couch of heather, and browse off the sweet shoots of the honeysuckle, and stand at will, knee-deep in the pools, amongst the green water-plantain. Never more would she rest her cheek against his shaggy neck, and say in his long, soft, furry ear: 'You and I,—we do not forget Joconda?'

Those who live in the great world, or the world of haste and toil, may think it a very little thing to lose an old mule to an unknown and almost certainly cruel fate. But to this child, in her loneliness, it was a loss more sad than words can easily tell. He was the only thing left to her of her old life, and he was gone away into misery.

She searched far and wide over the land for many days, and dropped her usual caution to ask questions of the few men she

met ; but Zefferino had been too cunning for her. He and the mule were far away ; the animal, in a dealer's hands, being sold at Massa, and the little traitor safe with his mother's brother, who lived not on Bolsena water, but at the foundries at Follonica.

So Zirlo dropped out of her life, and the solitude which she had told Sanctis was so dear to her closed in upon her yet more completely.

She was not alarmed by the threats of Zefferino's father, for she knew there was now nothing in the place to which his kind would attach value ; but she was afraid lest others hearing of the tombs would drive her out of them, and often in the night she awoke and listened, hearing the call of the bittern, or the cry of the hare seized by a booted-eagle. She was not afraid, but she was troubled.

Another and a yet greater sorrow also fell upon her at that time. Leone was killed.

To the woods one afternoon two of the smiths of Follonica came with their guns to shoot what they might of the furred and feathered owners of the soil. It was against the law at this season, but there was no one to enforce the law ; it would need legions of mounted guards to scour Maremma and

secure obedience. No one sees, no one cares; the shot beasts and the trapped birds are carried through the very gates of the towns, and the law is a dead letter.

She had been at one work or another all the morning and was tired. In a mossy dell some mile or two distant from the sepulchres—a green shady place, pranked with the blue and the rose-coloured lychnis, and the wild convolvulus, and the clematis both white and purple—she sat down to rest a little while amongst the mosses, and the warmth and the drowsy air overcame her, and her eyelids dropped, and her limbs stretched themselves out at ease, and she fell fast asleep.

There were many a danger there of asps that might creep from under the boulders of tufa, and of vipers that might steal from under the great leaves of the *pan di serpe*; even the booted-eagle, who passes his summers in the Apennines, might sail across the sky and espy her and do battle with her, as she had once seen him do it with a grand-duke owl till both of them fell dead together. But of these risks she seldom thought, and Leone lay at her feet and watched her quiet breathing.

As she so slept, there came near the two smiths from Follonica, and they caught sight of her, and, being warm with wine they had carried with them, burst through the network of greenery and were about to put rough hands on her in her unconscious slumber, when the dog, who had seen them approach, and watched without a sound, but with his lips curled back from his teeth and the hair of his shoulders bristling, sprang upon them with a leap of such sudden force that he sent one of them staggering backwards till he fell, and pinned the other at the throat.

The one whom he held with his powerful teeth he shook like a rat to and fro, the man could do nothing; but the other who had fallen, and whose fowling-piece had been unloaded, tottered to his feet, rammed a charge down the muzzle of the gun, and fired.

At the sound of the shot, Musa awaking, sprang to her feet; but it was too late to save her friend: shot through the head, Leone dropped like a stone and fell dead.

Ere her startled eyes were fully awake, her knife was out of her girdle, and the cowards fled for their lives as they saw its

blade flash in the air. She flew on in their wake, but they dived and dipped beneath the thick oak scrub ; she lost them as the gaze-hound loses its quarry. She threw herself beside the body of the dog, and the green earth and the blue sky seemed to her to grow red as if soaked in his blood.

He had been her playfellow and her protector for so many years. At night she had slept safely, knowing him near ; from infancy, when her baby's hand had closed on his white curls, he had been her comrade, her companion, her keeper, and of later years, in her sorrows and her solitude, he had given her all the tender and comprehensive sympathy which the dog so willingly gives, so rarely receives in return.

And now his life was gone out in her defence ; never again would his frank brown eyes seek sunshine in her smile.

He lay stone-dead in a pool of his own blood that crimsoned the white bells of the bindweed ; and his murderers had escaped and were lost for ever in the wide waste of Maremma. She could not weep, she could not cry out ; she took his poor shattered head in her hands and kissed it. If she

could have avenged him with her own life she would have given it.

She cursed her foolish hour of sleep.

She sat there beside him till the day waned and the deep blue shadows of evening began to lengthen over the wold.

Then she raised his body in her arms and put him over her shoulders as she would have carried a child, and began slowly, and with effort, thus burdened, to make her sad way homeward.

The weight was great ; the mile of moorland seemed like ten. She went with bent back and limbs that trembled as if all in a moment she had grown very old ; but she did not relinquish her task. He had done more for her. She would not leave him in the woods for the fox and the polecat and the carrion birds to find.

It was long past nightfall when she reached her refuge ; her clothes were soaked through with blood, his weight had chilled, stiffened, numbed her ; but she had brought him home.

The next day she made his grave under the alaternus and the myrtle ; and now on earth was utterly alone.



CHAPTER XX.

THE summer passed on. Sanctis did not return, and she gave him no thought. The wild flowers ceased to bloom ; the torrid heats descended on the earth ; under the passing rain storms the hot soil seethed and smoked ; the Serpent-bearer gleamed nightly in the south-east, and from Perseus shooting-stars fell across the heavens.

The height of summer here is the weird, the oppressive, the ghastly season of the year ; rarely even has the sunset beauty, the red rayless ball too often lends but a red, dull hectic to the sun and sky. The chanting tree-frogs are happy, and all the snakes and the heat-loving lizards ; nothing else is.

The panting fox hangs his tongue out

even as he lies in his cool damp earth ; the porcupine sleeps supine ; the birds doze, songless ; the hare is hot even in her leafy form lined with the milkwort ; there is not a breath even amongst the sedges, that rustle so readily at the least air ; the very water is sickly and lukewarm, even under the moon, when the snipes are bathing and questing.

When the rains come, as they do often here, they scarcely bring any coolness ; they only serve to distil the dangerous miasma from the ground.

For the first time in her life the season affected Musa ; she was not ill in any way, but she felt tired and oppressed. Treachery is like the fever of these lands ; its injury may be shaken off and its poison defied, yet where it has once entered no life is ever quite the same again. Zirlo was only a little, selfish, cunning, merciless child ; but he had stabbed her to the quick.

Never once did she regret her refusal to Maurice Sanctis. He had been so unlike all she had ever known ; what he offered was so unintelligible to her. His relationship to Joconda seemed to her so like a fable, so unreal, so intangible, that he had left no impress on her mind.

When she thought of him at all, it was with a contemptuous impatience and wonder, such as she had felt at Daniello Villamagna.

But the sailor was nearer to her, more comprehensible; she would have liked to own the good brig if she could have done so without his owning her.

The Sicilian she laughed at, but in a measure understood; Maurice Sanctis she understood not at all.

Meantime, in a great château of the western provinces, Sanctis himself pursued his work on vast blank wall spaces, which he had promised to make bloom as the rose, with frescoes of the old sweet story of Eros and Psyche.

To every true artist there is no such true delight as fresco; no method which gives so entirely the sense of the power of instantaneous creation. Surely, also, art has never been so great since the panel and the canvas supplanted the wide wall-surface, so eloquent in its barrenness to those who can see with the eye of the mind, as Raffaëlle saw when he went through the Stanze that he was called to decorate, dreaming of the School of Athens.

Sanctis would not have been unworthy

to unloose the sandals of the Angel of Urbino.

He worshipped Art and followed it with humble and perfect reverence.

If there were too great an austerity, too chill a calm, in his creations, as in Flaminio's, and Laurens', and Overbeck's, they were absolutely pure, entirely noble.

Under his touch now his Eros became too entirely the incarnation of spiritual love, his Psyche too entirely the embodiment of the soul; but the myth lost none of its grace and gained a holiness not its own under his treatment.

But, for the first time, his heart was not in the work of his hand. He had not his usual interest in his creations. He had his usual fine thought, delicate touch, subtle meaning in what grew beneath the sweep of his brush, but for ever between him and the fresco came the remembrance of the Musoncella and of Maremma.

As he drew the gold curls and fair face of his Psyche, he saw always the dark and brilliant face of that daughter of the Etruscan Mastarna. As he painted the Greek portico, the cool *atrium*, the dark green of orange and myrtle touching white

marble, he only saw the red glow of the tufa soil, the amethyst and sapphire of the mountains, the dusk of the silent tombs, the lustre of the eyes of the offspring of Saturnino.

He knew her origin ; his knowledge let him trace the possible current of oriental blood that had most likely been unmingled with any foreign stream in all the generations who had borne the name of Mastarna and dwelt upon the site of the ancient Saturnia. Her passionate instinct of attachment to the Tyrrhene nation might come from transmitted influences that for three thousand years and more, under the shadow of the Apennines, had been strong in a race that had changed neither its dwelling-place nor its instincts.

It was a fantastic idea, but it took hold of the mind of the artist, which was more dreamy and enthusiastic than he knew. He fancied that he saw the voluptuous Lydian of the days of Asian supremacy look from under those level brows and full eyelids of Saturnino Mastarna's child.

The memory of her pursued him and unnerved him ; he was angered against her. His reason told him that it was best for his

peace to see no more of a life which, brought into his own, in any way, would be as the wind and the lightning flash of the tempest are in serene pale April skies ; yet, think as he would, he could not shake off a sense of cowardice and wrong-doing in leaving undone the task that Joconda had asked her brothers to do. He could not, whether in the historic silence of the old Armorican castle, or in the mirthful and crowded streets of Paris, forget for any length of time that solitary figure as he saw it stand amidst the amber of the coronilla and the broom.

She was so strong, so fearless, so fierce, so lonely, dwelling there amidst the graves of her perished nation ; she was beautiful as a hawk is, poised on a bough of oak and looking with bold and brilliant eye down the shaft of the golden sunbeam. She had that grace, that strength, that untamed dignity and daring, which the free things of forest and crag alone possess. The memory of her haunted Sanctis, whose life, all artist though he was, had been chill, orderly, calm, cultured, with little passion in it, and on it the yoke of an early training whose precision could never be wholly abandoned, for strong are the bonds of birth and habit.

He was a man of genius, and by custom a Parisian ; but there was much in him of the calm and simple mountaineer, of the patient and prudent alpine peasant. His work, his mind, his modes of life, were those of a famous painter who was also a rich man, and could build for himself a house that was a temple of art ; but his nature remained that which had been Anton's and Joachim's before him. He loved order, method, cleanliness in morals, serenity in the manner of his days ; his paintings erred in almost too great an abundance of limpidity, of mathematical exactitude, of faultless perspective ; they were so perfect that they seemed a reproach to a hurrying and careless world that loves *brio* and celerity. Never in all his life had a thought that was unwelcome and poisonous been harboured by him for more than a moment ; his clear and calm mind had been always able to repel it. But the desire to return to that strange, unhealthy, luxuriant, mournful land where Musa dwelt grew upon him, and although he resisted he could not banish it. And he smarted with a sense of cowardice, remembering that he had allowed her to drive him from it.

‘Doubtless the Sicilian lover is with her,’ he said again and again to himself as he worked on at the great frescoes.

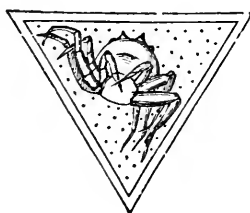
And yet he could not fancy her with any lover; he could not think of those superb lips as tremulous with any tenderness or warmed with any kiss. It seemed to him that she could never live in any other way than so, alone with her Etruscan dead.

To living humanity she was the Musoncella.

He worked at the frescoes summer and autumn, and was never content with them; and went back to Paris, where his house was the envy of his fellows. There he shut himself in during those chilly autumn days when the leaves were flying in scarlet squadrons down the asphalte without, and he painted that which haunted him.

He portrayed her just as he had seen her in the hot transparent morning, with the gold of the coronilla and the broom behind her, and the turquoise blue of the sky beyond. He gave the picture that strength, that liberty, that untamable spirit, that freshness of open-air life, and that repose of solitude which were in her. His

friends came and saw it in progress and called it Maia, Erinna, Heliodora, and many another classic name; and said that it would be the grandest and most luminous thing that he had ever created. But one day he was struck with a sudden unreasoning sense of utter hatred to it; he drew a great brush-full of bistre over the damask rose of the mouth, the oriental sombreness and mystery of the eyes, and set it with its face to the grey wall, and locked his studio and went away.





CHAPTER XXI.

MEANWHILE, in Maremma, as the August heats lay heavy on the land, fate was at work for Musa ; the fate which comes to all, and sometimes, like the prophet of old, blesses and curses in the same breath.

One day she went out on the sea ; the sea was as hot as the land was, but still she was glad to bathe in it, to swim against it, to pull her boat through it, to watch its lovely colours, here the hue of a pigeon's breast, there deeply, darkly blue as the indigo-berries of the laurestinus when they purpled the moors in autumn. There was a slight southerly wind, and it filled the little lateen sail that she had contrived, by much hard work with axe and mallet, to fix up in

her treasure-trove of a boat. She had made the mast from a young pine, and had woven and stitched the canvas herself. In the pleasure of her sail, she went far and stayed late ; it was evening when she went down the steps of the tombs.

As she descended, she saw in the twilight of her home a lonely figure sitting crouched before the embers of the fire. Her heart beat wildly, not with fear but rage. Who had dared to violate her sanctuary ? And with her wrath there mingled apprehension ; if shepherd or forester found out this safe shelter, would they ever leave to her sole ownership of it ?

She looked through the boughs down into the gloom. She could not see the face of the stranger ; his head was bowed on his hands and his whole frame crouched up like that of a stray and shivering dog.

She took the long knife she always wore in her girdle and went down the steps ; at the slight sound she made the intruder looked up as she had seen startled animals look, sprang to his feet, and, before she could stop him, had prostrated himself at hers.

‘ I claim your shelter,’ he said, and he

kissed her rough woollen skirts. 'I am an innocent man, hunted and miserable. Save me!'

Musa stood over him with her grave luminous face full of sudden compassion. Her hand still held the long knife, but she showed neither doubt nor fear of him.

'Who are you?' she said simply.

'I was a prisoner on Gorgona; I escaped with Saturnino; we parted company in the storm that overtook us. I saw him again when he was hiding a few days later; he had doubled like a fox. He described this place to me and bade me make for it. I am wounded—and tired—and—forgive me.'

A great faintness came over him as he spoke; his lips turned blue, his heart seemed to cease to beat, and he sank downwards on the earthen floor. A wound in his shoulder had burst out bleeding afresh.

Musa threw her knife on the ground; she busied herself with such restoratives as she knew, and with a firm hand bound up the gunshot wound while he still lay insensible. Then she forced a little wine that Joconda had kept as a cordial between his lips, and bathed his head and face with cold water.

After a little he regained consciousness,

but only languidly, and he did not fully awake to the remembrance of what had passed.

‘You are good ; you are good ; that cools me,’ he murmured as the water fell on him.

He was in a feverish sort of trance, his skin was burning, and his breath was short and quick.

She was absorbed in her efforts to help him ; she did not notice that he was a man young, and wonderfully handsome, with the beauty of the Greek ideal ; beauty which not exposure, or imprisonment, or shame, or terror, or privation, or the ghastly horrors of the galleys had had any power to destroy, though they had wasted, darkened, and dimmed it, as dust and ill-usage obscure the soilless glory and fine lines of the marble god. Of all this she saw nothing, thought nothing ; it was enough for her that he was hunted and in fear, like the beasts and the birds of the Maremma.

She tended him as she would have taken care of a stricken deer or a maimed hawk. Saturnino’s name said nothing to her. She thought of him only as a thief who had robbed the dead ; but even as she had aided

and pitied him, so she did this man. There was in her blood a fierce hatred of law and oppression ; a keen sympathy with all that was driven and persecuted.

After awhile the stranger became more awake to where he was, and recovered, as the wine flowed down into his chilled, bruised, weary body, sight and speech and sense. She had piled dead wood on the hearth, and he was still stretched where he had first dropped before it. The night was cold, though the days were scorching, and the heat of the fire was welcome to his limbs, numbed with long fatigue and exposure in woods and marshes where he had disputed acorns with the boars and the rats.

‘ You will not give me up ? ’ he said, with a timid appeal in his great dark eyes.

Musa standing above him, in her strength and her health, smiled with a little scorn. ‘ Why do you come to me if you think so ? ’

‘ Saturnino said you had been good to him, and that the place was a sure refuge.’

He did not say that Saturnino had also said to him :

‘ If the maiden be squeamish, or be like

to be treacherous, you can easily rid yourself of her—a fawn's neck is soon slit.'

'He was vile himself,' she said hastily, with sternness in her eyes. 'What think you he did? He stole the gold cups and platters—theirs. I was glad when I learned he was taken.'

'Can you be so cruel?' said the refugee with a little look of wonder and fear.

'I do not see that I am cruel; he was a traitor and a thief. If I let you stay, will the place be sacred to you?'

'You and it, that I swear.'

'Stay then,' said Musa, with calm unconcern.

It did not occur to her that he was a man, and young; her innocence was too grand a thing for that.

'You did not do the crime they took you for?' she asked him with a long, grave look into his face.

'No; that also I swear. I was guiltless as you.'

She felt that his answer was the truth.

'What was the crime?'

'I was accused of the murder of my mistress.'

'Ah!'—she drew a deep breath; it did

not seem to her anything very strange ; the knife was a common cure of faithlessness in Maremma.

‘She was false?’ she added.

‘Not false to me. Nor slain by me. God in heaven hears me ! Never.’

‘Very well. I believe,’ she said simply. ‘You can tell me more when you will. Now you are unwell—tired and feverish. I will make you a bed of leaves—there is nothing else—in the further chamber, and you had best go to it.’

‘Can you sleep amongst these tombs?’ he cried, and glanced around the sepulchres with awe.

‘The dead do not hurt us,’ said Musa, with a grave tenderness. ‘They have but gone before where soon we go.’

The young man shuddered a little. Life had been glorious to him, and was still sweet and precious.

It needs a pure soul to love the dead.

She left him, and made a bed of moss and leaves in the innermost chamber of the tombs ; she filled one of the black vases with the thin wine of Joconda’s store, and put it

with some bread beside the bed ; she lit a little wick in a little oil in one of the Etruscan lamps, and set it in the place ; she went to the spring that welled through the passage beyond, and filled a big copper vessel with it for a bath.

‘That is all I can do,’ she thought, intent on her preparations as Nausicaa for her hero from the sea.

It was a pleasure to have some one to serve and to defend.

‘Can you walk to the spot?’ she said to him. ‘If not, lean on me ; I am strong.’

‘I think I can walk,’ he said, embarrassed somewhat because she was not so ; and he rose and dragged himself feebly into the third chamber.

‘I am so tired,’ he muttered. ‘I think I should let the carabineers take me now as easily as a stunned hare.’

‘The carabineers will not come here,’ said Musa. ‘Do not think of them. Sleep, and if you want any aid give a shout, and I shall hear.’

‘You are good to me,’ murmured the stranger with a little confusion, looking at her as she stood with the light of her own lamp shed on her dark level brows,

her lustrous eyes, her up-thrown masses of bronze-hued hair, and the form that was clad in the white lambs'-wool as the fauns and nymphs of old may have been clad in Tempe and Arcadia when through the gladness of the woods the winds of winter rustled.

‘I will say of you as the angel Gabriel said of Madonna Lisa,’ he said with a little smile, ‘that you are the fairest thing that ever was seen in Mondo or Maremma.’

‘Oh, not I,’ said Musa, with a little displeasure. ‘When the rose and crimson flamingoes come like a cloud red with the sun’s setting, they are much more beautiful than I. Do the angels ever remember Maremma? I think not. Who could tell you they did? Good-night to you; good repose.’

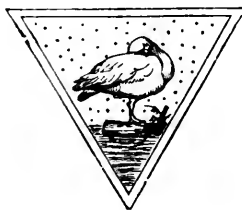
Then she went across the other chambers, crossing herself as she passed the coffin of Joconda, and in time laid herself down on her own bed as calmly as though no human intruder had disturbed her solitude.

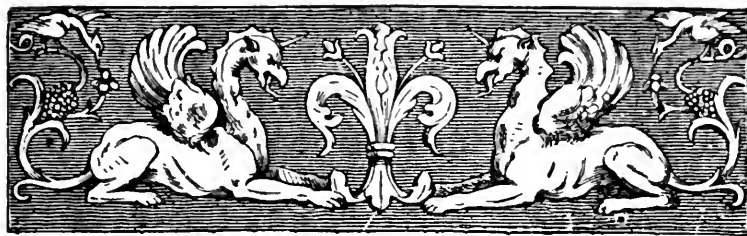
Only, every now and then she kept awaking with a start, and, sitting up on her rough couch, listened with ears as eager and sure as the deer’s to hear whether any sound

on the night's silence was like the tramp of the soldiers of the State. She was afraid for him ; she was not afraid of him.

True, once before she had sheltered a galley-slave, and he had robbed her ; but she felt no distrust now. When this man had said, 'I am innocent,' there had been truth in his voice ; and she had sympathy with him as she had with the large-eyed deer, with the rose-red phenicopteraë, with the timid hare and the brave boar, and all the man-hunted things of the marsh and the moor.

The blood of an outlaw was in her.





CHAPTER XXII.

SHE was up whilst the sun was still unseen, and only a geranium colour, lovely and wondrous as that of the flamingo's wings, was spreading over the darkness of the Maremma. She looked into his chamber; the lamp was spent, but he was sleeping. She could see the outline of his head and shoulders resting on the homely linen she had spread above the leaves.

She went softly back again; went out, and plunged into the tarn and bathed; then clothed herself and set about the preparation of such humble meal as she could make with water and with bread and with the sweet herbs of the moors. It had always done very well for her, but she doubted

whether it would suffice for him. She looked for some eggs from her fowls, and she was pleased that she could find three.

Then she took up the silver-framed mirror of burnished steel that had been buried there with some regal or noble woman, and that now served her to give her back a dim reflection of her own face, and she combed and brushed her short rich hair till it shone like dusky gold that the fires have burnished and reddened. For the first time in her life she looked at the great eyes that surveyed her from the mirror, and said to herself, 'Is it true that I am good to look at? Joconda said so once or twice, but then she loved me.'

She had never heard of Boccaccio, but a drop of the old potent Florentine philtres that Boccaccio used had touched her lips.

She was leaning on the sward outside her home, and gazing into the steel mirror which was lying upon the grass.

For the first time she looked with interest on the face that the Etruscan mirror reflected, and wondered if indeed it were handsome.

She did not know that her head was like that of Carlo's angel, and her body like one

of the beautiful, lissom, strong, and harmonious figures that are still left to us in Greek marble.

As she looked down on the reflection, where she lay, with her chin resting on her hands and her elbows leaning in the thick wild thyme, a scorpion, black and hideous, ran out of the herbs and passed across the steel face of the mirror which was engraven with the figures of the Tyndarids, dear to Etruria as to Rome.

She started as the ugly dangerous insect passed over her own image.

She rose to her feet and left the steel flatterer lying amongst the dewes on the ground. The scorpion remained upon its silver framework.

‘Do you come to tell me that to think of my face is a sin?’ she said to the beast; ‘a sin as ugly and as poisonous as you?’

Joconda had always told her so; but the soul of her vigorous and brilliant youth insensibly rebelled against these austere negations of the flesh. Nature told her to rejoice in herself as the Hellenic anthologists told the beautiful boy and the virgin who stripped for the race.

The soul of the Greek lives oftentimes in the Italian, though it lives benighted and struggling in bonds and unconscious of itself.

She left the mirror still lying on the grass and went within. She took some food in one of the earthen jars and went towards his chamber.

‘Are you arisen?’ she called softly.

He answered her feebly :

‘I cannot rise ; my limbs seem made of stone. I fear the chills have got into my very bones ; I am in great pain——’

She went forward to his side.

‘Our marshes will do that sometimes,’ she said, with a soft pity in her eyes, like that which came there when she saw a hunted bird or beast and could not save it. ‘I have seen that malady ; it is as though your whole body were frozen ; but if you have not much fever it may pass. I have brought some good food—eat it.’

She held the earthen *holkion*, and a wooden spoon, towards him, and he took a little of her broth and said that it was good, and then took more.

With the momentarily revived forces that came to him after the food, he drew a

quick breath from aching lungs, and with many a pause from weakness, and many an involuntary shudder from cruel memories, he told her how he had first come thither from Gorgona.

‘Saturnino and I escaped together, and one other man, who, poor wretch, was shot as he leapt from the wall. We had planned it long before we could find the occasion to take that mad plunge into the sea. We swam and swam, and at last fortune favoured us in a wondrous way, we came on a drifting boat, the boat, I suppose, of some wrecked *tartana*, she was Mediterranean build. In that we rowed; and sculled ourselves warily all night long, and gained the coast, and hid all day long under the rocks off Romito. There is a wild thicket of rosemary there; it served to hide us. At night-fall we took to the sea again. The idea of Saturnino was to get ashore somewhere near either the Albegna’s or the Fiora’s mouth, and so in time creep home to his old lair by Monte Labbro. We pulled all day long; we were half dead of hunger and thirst; we had drunk at a spring near Romito, and for food we had a bit of black Gorgona bread, but we had finished that at dawn. We

rowed on, keeping some way off the shore, hoping against hope that if the coastguard or the carabinieri saw us they would see in us two fishermen and nothing more. The heat was frightful; the sea looked still enough, and glassy and oily, but there was a heavy swell underneath that made the pulling hard. I know not how many miles we rowed that day, but they must have been many. We rowed on all that day and caught some fish and ate it raw, and chewed the seaweed, and were nearly mad. At night we stole on land; thirst drove us; it was a wild place, and we found fresh water and some wild fruit. At daybreak, after sleeping like drunkards, we went to sea again and pulled along the coast; we saw the mounted soldiers riding along the Tombola, by the bay of Populonia. They were looking for us, that is certain. At three o'clock, or thereabouts as nearly as we could tell by the sun, an awful storm burst over us. It was quite sudden, or seemed so; it was rainless and horrible. The waves rose like walls; the wind drove us like a whip in some giant's hand; great clouds of foam on the sea, and of dust on the land, obscured the shore and the horizon. We were thrown to and fro

like a cockleshell ; the noise of the wind all the while like rushing cataracts. The sky was livid with lightning, the thunder pealed like the cannon of vast armies. Our little skiff overturned ; we could not right her, we were thrown headlong into the hissing water. She was flung about for a few moments, and then dashed like a plaything far out of our reach. We were in the deep sea, faint for want of food and almost weary to insensibility. How I gained the shore I cannot tell. But I did. Saturnino I never saw. Later I heard that——'

'I saved him !' said Musa, who had held her breath and listened with parted lips.

'Yes, I know !——'

'Yes,' she proceeded unheeding, 'I plucked him out of the sea, and I hid him here, and he paid me by stealing the gold of the tombs.'

'He told me that. We met up in the mountains, up under the Labbro ; he had made me acquainted with all the haunts and hiding-places of the hills. We had endured unutterable misery, both of us. To me women had been kind—they are always so to a man in misfortune' [in his thought he said,

rather, to one who is young and well-looking]. ‘We were but a few days together; he told me of the gold out of the tomb, and I blamed him hotly, and we came to fierce words; he went down to the Orbetellano to sell that gold, though I told him to attempt it would be his own undoing; and I went up to his old favourite lair on the Rocca del Giulio, where it is cold as winter even in the canicular heats. You will understand, of course, that all this time we moved with the greatest caution, and only at night, like the bats and the owls. Well, in the Orbetellano he was taken as I heard, but I heard it long afterwards, and I remained awaiting him up at the Giulio. There were some stone cabins there, very wretched ones, where his band had dwelt, and there were still remnants of their booty and of the things they used. There was even a child’s toy in ivory of Indian workmanship; taken, I suppose, when they plundered a train or stopped a travelling-carriage. It seemed strange to see it, that frail toy, in such a solitude! Well, there I passed the autumn and the winter; I lived miserably, that is of course. I picked up the pine cones and cut the brushwood; and there were old friends of Mastarna’s

down at a hovel that is called a hostelry in the hamlet of Saturnia, and for his sake and for love of outwitting the law, for they were all smugglers, if not worse, they sent me up coarse food once in eight days and took down the fuel. So I lived. It was hardly better than Gorgona, except that there was the sense of a relative freedom, and the sight of the clouds that lay beneath one of a morning, and, when they cleared at noon, showed so glorious an expanse of wood, and moor, and cliff, and sea, far down, so far down!—One saw as the eagle sees. But I was for ever on the watch, and scarce dare, even in the bitter days and nights of winter on the mountains, light a fire, though timber was so plentiful and near, lest any glow of flame or any curl of smoke should tell my hunters I was hiding there. Then I heard from the men of Saturnia that Saturnino had been captured afresh and been for months in the prisons of Orbetello. That hurt me greatly, for though I knew he was but a brute and stained with many crimes of blood-guiltiness, yet there were a force and a rough generosity in him which allured one.'

'It was generous to steal the gold!'

'No, it was mean; but what would

you? He had been a robber all his life, and he was at that moment most desperate, starving, homeless; besides, it was only *roba delle tombe* to him.'

'That is what is so vile! The dead could not defend it, or strike him down.'

'I know, I know! But, my dear, wild and lawless men who go to the galleys come out of them devils. I myself, who had long habits of education and social observance behind me, I was little better than any, for when I had been for six months in that accursed place, when hunger and thirst tortured me, I could have killed or robbed like Saturnino. What we call our soul is only in safety so long as our body feeds! He took your gold, and that was bad, and to wrong your trust was worse; but he has paid for both sins heavily. He will not get away again from his torture. Well, when I heard he had been shot down, but taken alive, I lost heart and hope; he had seemed my only friend. The time went by most miserably, until, one daybreak, I saw down amidst the cork woods the glitter of the musketry of soldiers. Whether one of the men at Saturnia had betrayed me or not I cannot tell,

but it was certain the soldiery were out after me. In the stillness of dawn I could hear their heavy tread, and their weapons breaking the branches as they passed. They were hundreds of feet down below me. I packed a little bread up, and took a dagger I had found in those huts—the dagger you see, a three-edged old dagger of Florence—and then I fled for my life again, and hid in the holes of the rocks with the other hunted beasts of the hills. That was in April last ; I knew the month because the ashes were in blossom, and made the woods below look as if a snow-storm had fallen on them. It is of no use going over all I suffered—suffering of starvation, of exhaustion, of cold, of heat, of rheumatism, of cramp, of wet, of darkness, of perpetual terror. Ah ! do not think me a coward ! I have been palsied with fear—I am still !’

He gazed at her with dilated eyes, with straining ears, with panting breath, with shivering flesh ; his danger was ever present. Even now the muskets of the soldiers might be glancing in the moonlight amongst the Christ’s thorn above the sepulchres.

Musa was alarmed at his look.

‘ You are unwell,’ she said gently. ‘ Do

not talk any more, and be not afraid. Here no one will come—you are safe !’

‘Safe!’ he echoed, with so poignant a despair that it struck her heart with cold as if his three-edged dagger of Florence had pierced it. ‘No ; I can never more be safe on earth, though I wander as long as Ahasuerus. There is nothing more to tell ; you can guess what my life has been—hiding and creeping away through all this green land, for ever afraid of every sound, of every breeze, of every leaf ! I came down here without knowing I was near you, and then by certain landmarks that I saw I recognised the place of the tombs that Mastarna had described to me, and I resolved to throw myself upon your mercy, and in your absence I crept down the steps. I was very faint ; I have eaten nothing but berries several days, and I have an open wound on my shoulder. A month or more ago the soldiers were near enough to me to fire at me, and they hit me ; though it is but a flesh wound it does not close, and it is painful. I have lain out many nights on your moors, and men used to say that it was death to do that. I have doubled like the fox ; the soldiers believe me gone to the

hills again ; but any hour they may find out and come.'

He shuddered ; his eyes closed, his head fell back upon his rude pillow of dried grasses. So much speech had exhausted his enfeebled spirit and frame.

'I shall be very ill,' he said wearily. 'You had better turn me out whilst I can crawl away from you.'

'I will care for you till the illness passes,' she answered.

'It were better to call the carabineers,' he said bitterly. 'A sick man and a felon—what can you do with me?'

'I will tend you till you are well,' she said simply again. 'You are quite safe here. No one, except a little goat-boy and two strangers who are far away, even knows of these tombs. It is true there is little food for you, but there will be enough to keep you from hunger.'

'But why should you do all this for me?'

'Because you have no one else to help you.'

'That is very noble of you!'

'Why that? I have no one either. Leone whom I loved is dead.'

‘Leone? What was he?’

‘He was a dog.’

‘Is that all you have had to love?’

‘I had a woman; she was very old. She died in the summer of last year.’

‘You loved her very much, I think, by the sound of your voice; there are tears in it.’

‘She was very good.’

‘Tell me what is your name?’

‘I am called Musa. And yours?’

‘I am Luitbrand d’Este.’

‘That is a very long, fine name. It is not of Maremma—at least I think not.’

‘No, it is not; it is of the north, of the Lombard plains, where the snow lies long in winter-time, and the rivers rage and outspread themselves till the land is drowned, and men and their cattle and their cities are drowned too.’

‘You should not speak any more. You are weak. I will go and get a brazier and light you a fire, and I will make you some herb-tea that will be good for your pain. Lie and sleep if you can. It is such a fair day without. It is a pity you cannot see it.’

‘I should not dare to look out into the

light if I could rise. You forget that I am a hunted beast.'

'That is why I trouble myself for you,' she answered. 'I would always save the boars if I could. They kill nothing; they only eat roots and berries, and men hunt them wickedly. Of course they fight when they are pressed; so did you. Now lie still and sleep, and I will light a fire.'

She had burned some fallen wood in the summer into charcoal, and made of that the *brace*, which was the only form of fire known in Santa Tarsilla. She filled a big vessel with this; a metal *lebes* that had served in Etruscan times to hold the wines of a funeral feast. Once lighted, the slow warmth of the smouldering embers soon spread itself through the place, though it had no power to cure the chills and shivering of the sick man.

She did for him what she had seen Joconda do for those thus afflicted; and the grand sunshine and storm of the late summer days passed over the moors and mountains, and the *libeccio* blew the sea into a field of foam, a steam of mist, and for the first time she kept no count of the change on the face of nature, but in the twilight of the Etruscan tombs watched the waning of strength, the

flickering of breath, the half-unconscious torture of a human frame.

For days together she never left the sepulchre.

She waited on his lassitude, his heats, his chills, his shuddering pains, all the long hours through, doing what she could do to alleviate his ills; and at night, when she lit the little bronze lamp with oil, she was alone with a man delirious, and who seemed to her on the point of death.

She never felt that temptation, which a coward would have felt, to leave him to his fate and rush away from this misery and danger into safety where the dwelling of men and the meeting of roofs would give it. She prayed passionately for him. That was all she did. She never had heard of physicians; there was not one at Santa Tarsilla. If such a person were needed he had to be sought from Orbetello, and no one dreamt of doing that once in ten years, though the surgeon of the Orbetellano was considered the parish doctor of the whole district. There was hardly any one in the villages in summer, and the few that were there, in winter, cured themselves with nostrums or with simples, and, if they could

not cure, lay down meekly like suffering animals, called the priest, and died. Therefore of medical help or service she had no idea; and if she had known of it, could not have left the sick man to seek it. And Zirlo had been a traitor; she could no more call to him across the moorlands and see his little brown face peer through the brushwoods in answer.

She was utterly alone with this hunted creature who seemed at once frozen and on fire, and of whom she knew nothing. It never occurred to her to be afraid or to summon other help. Distrust of others was an instinct in the child of Saturnino, and the loneliness of her life with Joconda had made independence of human sympathy and aid her second nature.

If she had wished it, moreover, she knew that she would have called for help in vain. Of the sickly timid souls of Santa Tarsilla, not one would have ventured here, and of the rude, scattered herdsmen and husbandmen native to Maremma she knew nothing, and they had their toil, which was their all, to fill their time.

So she remained alone beside the nearly dying man.

But as fear paralyses the feeble, so it nerves the courageous ; she was brave, and she did not let her fear conquer her compassion. And she was afraid of the strangers coming as Sanctis had come, afraid of the greed of the labourers on the moors and the hills if it were known that there was something here strange and worth seeing ; and if such as these came, then after them would come the guards. These thoughts kept her anxious and awake all through that long night ; she sat by the sick man's bed on the stone chair sculptured there for the dead Etrurians to occupy, and listened to his disjointed, wandering speech, and watched the oil flame flicker in the lamp that had been fashioned by hands lifeless three thousand years before.

She knew his malady to be that deadly scourge of the soil, called the *perniciosa* ; that terrible fever which seems to have joined hands with frost and fire. Twice the fatal fit came on him ; the ceaseless shivering and trembling, the blue pinched cold, the bloodless icy collapse of the whole tortured body. The third seizure would mean death, she knew. Raging heat, as though his flesh were melting in a furnace, followed, and held

him in its power for many days, but the cold fit returned not, and she began to hope that life would be stronger than the marsh-poison.

What the fugitive said in his stupor told her nothing of him.

When he was sensible, he complained of thirst and racking pain ; when he was delirious, he thought that the carabineers were on him, and he struggled with them and shouted aloud. Sometimes he murmured passionate love words and called with yearning endearment on the name of Aloysia.

‘How could they think he killed her, since he loves her so?’ thought Musa as she heard.

For fifteen months he had been wandering, pursued, hidden amidst hill-forests or by the sea in caves, holding his life in his hand, more wretched than a hunted stag or fox, waking from every hour of jaded sleep with the memory that his foes were seeking him and might be behind each rock, each tree, each tuft of marucca. Now that he had dropped thus in exhaustion, his harassed brain could not escape the horrid terrors of his haunted past.

Once she had seen a trapped flamingo

struggle in the gin, writhing its flower-like body and its flame-like throat, and beating its crimson wings in madness and terror, till it died ; he made her think of the Egyptian bird.

It was a fear so natural which pursued him even into the stupor of insensibility that it seemed, not craven, but merely human, as is the fear of men in shipwreck.

She soothed him as well as she knew how, with wet moss upon his head, and water ever to his reach. To her, used as she was to the open air and the open sea, there could have been no greater deprivation than to remain cooped up under the vault of stone all through the brilliant days of the late summer. Yet she stayed down in the tombs for this stranger's sake, only going out for such time as it was absolutely necessary to take for the finding of simples and of food, and the cutting of wood for fuel. She missed the help of Zefferino sorely ; and without him the little gains she had made were lost to her, at least were lost until she could be free to carry what she sold herself to the hill-villages, and this she would then be afraid to do lest it should lead to discovery not of her refuge

alone, but of the fugitive she harboured there.

She wanted many things for this terrible sickness with which she alone fought ; but she could get none of them. She could not bring herself to leave him in his great peril for so long a time as it would take to go to Santa Tarsilla or Telamone ; and, even if she had left him, her appearance in those places to which she had been so long lost would have provoked comment, wonder, and possibly pursuit, and, with pursuit, the sight of one for whom to be seen by human eyes would mean a lifetime spent at the galleys. So she had to do as she could with the narrow means within her reach ; and whilst the fever lasted the demands of the sick man on her were not great. The water from the nearest spring, a drink she made from the bilberries on the moor, a little broth of herbs thickened with beaten egg, such as she had seen Joconda make for sick people—these were all he wanted, and often more than she could force through his scorched lips, drawn back from his teeth in the convulsions of alternate heat and cold. The terrible nausea of his disease made even the spring water taste bad and bitter to him, though in

his devouring thirst he drank of it almost unceasingly, as if he had been shipwrecked on some bare rock without a drop to cool his mouth save such as rained from the clouds upon him.

But, if he should recover, when he should recover, she said always to herself, she knew very well that his hunger in convalescence would equal his long fasting now ; that he would want meat, wine, many things that she would never be able to procure ; and the thought of this kept her harassed and anxious, and blinded her eyes to the autumnal colours on the moors and woods, and made her heedless of the departure of her songsters from the myrtle coverts and the jungle of cistus and bay.

When the call of the striginæ echoed over the marshes, or the night heron's croak thrilled hoarsely through the dark, they startled her now. She took them for the shout of soldiery or the boom of powder.

As she watched his fever, and scanned the moors for him, so, as a child, she had watched the fluctuations of life in a storm-swallow with a broken wing that she had taken off the waves after a boatman had shot it. Often the bird had seemed lifeless,

with blind eyes and dulled plumage, and she had been sure that it was dead. Then she had warmed it in her bosom, and it had recovered. She had kept it all winter, and then the wing had grown whole once more. On Easter-day it had flown off her shoulder over the sea, a speck of silver and bronze in the sunshine, which she had watched with big tears in eyes that had never been so dimmed before.

As she had watched the bird then, so she watched now the struggle between life and death in the body of this doomed and hunted man.

When he was restless and could not sleep at all through the nights that seemed long as centuries, she took her mandoline and sang to soothe him such sonnets as she had sung to the shore people at Santa Tarsilla. The mellow, tender thrilling of the old *chitarra* chimed in softly with her voice, which in its youth and its clearness was as melodious as the spring and autumn song of the woodlark, which chaunts evèr, as the old French quatrain has it, ‘Adieu, dieu, adieu!’

Once above ground a shepherd went by over the turf, not witting of all that lay

below; and he heard that sweet lullaby beneath his feet thrilling through the earth, and was so terrified that he ran head-long, his flock behind him, and told for many a day in his own Pistoiese mountain home on winter nights that in Maremma the dead people sang below the soil, in the very heart and core of the round globe.

So, slowly, by one care and another of hers, her sick man rallied, and cast off little by little the weight of disease, and stretched out his thin transparent hands for more food than she found it easy to supply to him.

Slowly, as the September days grew shorter and the winter solstice came nearer, his resurrection began in the shadow of the Etruscan grave.

Towards daybreak at the close of the fifth week of his sojourn there, his fever grew lower; a quieter sleep came on his heavy eyelids, his limbs shivered less; he got some rest. She left him to let the fowls out into the air. The sun was once more coming up behind the dark edge of the moors. She scanned them with beating heart lest she should see any new-comer on them. Dread woke up with every dawn for her now; her old simple peace was gone for ever; the

peace that she had shared with the kid that cropped the pasture, with the arum that was curled within its green spathe.

She was thankful beyond words because at last some hope had come for him. Yet a deep sorrow took possession of her soul as she realised the burden bound upon her; tears rose in her eyes and veiled the carnation of the morning skies. She did not reason on it, but she felt that vast irreparable loss which no treasures of the world, or passions, or joys can adequately pay—the loss of youth's unconsciousness.

Never again could she go light-hearted to the shore to wade amidst the sea things, glad as they; never again would she come back over the brown moor in the hush of evening, content because a meal of chest-nuts or a few wild figs had been her day's sufficient gleanings.

The unconscious life—the life that is content with itself from sunrise until sunset from the mere sense of living, from the sheer sweet strength and health of the body that is fleet as the roe and tireless as the swallow—was gone for ever; and in its stead were the unrest, the bitterness, the pangs, the ecstasies of human affections.



CHAPTER XXIII.

HE was young and by nature strong, and his constitution conquered the insidious poison that had entered his blood from the vaporous marshes in the August heats. The unbroken silence, the cold water, the salutary herbs, all served to contribute to his victory over the fever-fiend of Maremma, and little by little he grew sensible of other things than those deadly chills, those waves of lava heat, which turn by turn had filled his entire consciousness so long. Then he saw that a woman all alone had done this great service for him, and hidden him from his pursuers, and kept vigil by him through many weary days and nights.

The weeks passed. Health very slowly re-

turned to him. He was but five-and-twenty years old, and the clinging to life was strong in him. Little by little, as time wore on, the light came back into his great brown eyes; the blood coursed smoothly beneath the delicate olive of his skin; the traces of fatigue and privation effaced themselves; a sense of safety and of tranquillity came on him. In the strange twilight of this home made with the dead the world seemed very far away. Sometimes it seemed to him as if he were himself dead, and buried there, and dreaming in his tomb. Only she was here too, this girl who waited on him as serenely as a boy, who had neither bashfulness nor boldness, who was without fear as she was without knowledge.

‘How can I thank you? What can I say to you?’ he muttered, as he became awake to the large debt he owed a stranger.

‘I would have done the same for a stag or a boar that had been hunted and hurt,’ she answered him a little roughly; for she was unused to talk of what she felt, and she was ashamed to be told she had done well.

He was too weak and too drowsy to say more.

A great catastrophe had shaken all his previous life to pieces, and plunged it into utter darkness. It seemed to him as if he had awakened in some other planet than the familiar earth.

But he was too feeble to reflect long or to ask more. She made him think of those immortals of whom he had read in Greek and Latin and in marbles ; they who moved through earth compassionate, yet aloof from love. As she stood before him in the gloom, clothed in her tunic of white wool, and with the birds of night about her, he thought of Persephone, of Nausicaa, of the nymphs looking on whom a man grew mad—of all old-world tales of beings who were on earth, not of it.

Yet they were humble cares she had for him. She made his fire, she made his bread, she made his soup ; she wove linen for him ; she sought far and wide for roots and berries and mushrooms such as he could eat. Sometimes she went down to the sea and netted fish for him ; at night, by the solitary lamp, she spun and sewed diligently to replace the garments of his prison that he wore.

She did the simplest and the humblest

things for him, but she did them as of yore they were done in Tempe, in Ilion, in Thessaly, in days when the Sun-god herded and ploughed for Admetus.

And all the while never once did it seem to cross her thoughts that she was a girl and he was a man.

He was weary, worn, full of care and fear; his senses were all absorbed in the one incessant carking anxiety lest his refuge should be found out, and his body, with a dead soul in it, killed by despair, dragged back to the hell of the galleys. As his ear was always strained for the least sound that should tell of his pursuers, so his whole nature and existence seemed to him bound up in that one terror of pursuit; the terror of the deer as he lies in the fern-brake, of the she-wolf as she hides with her cubs.

All other human instincts were momentarily suspended in him; all his being was absorbed into this one intense, overwhelming dread of his hunters and his doom.

‘If I but once get free,’ he thought, ‘never, so help me God, will I hunt to death any poor forest thing again!’

But how was he to get free? This was not freedom, this hiding amidst tombs and

darkness. It was a shelter, and as sure a one as earth could offer him, but it was a prison too. Often he thought of the sea, but the sea was guarded yet more closely than the mountains. He had passed the whole of one ghastly day floating on it, with the sun beating on his face and head, and an agony of thirst and an agony of exhaustion making the blue water terrible as Procrustes' bed. He dared not trust himself to it again.

Sunstroke, the jaws of a shark, the paralysis of cramp, death by thirst—any one of these might be his fate if he sought the sea. He would not dare to land anywhere; he would have to swim on and on and on; escape that way was hopeless.

These two passions—the passion of dread, and the passion of desire to escape—were too strong in him to let any other emotion move him. He dwelt on in this Etruscan solitude with this beautiful hand maiden beside him, and he only thought of her with vague doubt.

‘Is it true that she will not betray me?’ he wondered. ‘If they give her gold, will she not lead them hither?’

As he recovered he grew more and more

suspicious of her. Yet, had he known it, she watched for him as the stork watches sleepless on tower or tree-top by its wounded mate.

What she feared most was Zirlo. He had sold her secret, and he would, if he could, sell this fugitive; of that she was sure. Every hour her eyes searched the thickets and the hollows for the form of the faithless little goat-herd; but she never saw him. He had been too terrified to venture near the tombs.

From Zirlo she was safe. But it was now autumn; shepherds, hunters, travellers came at times across the moors. Any moment the white cone of the wood smoke might be seen by some passer-by; any moment some one might ask her what she did there under the thick marucca scrub.

She was for ever alarmed and on the watch, like the wild partridges that sleep in their circle, back to back, ready for instantaneous flight at any second.

The very shadows cast across the plains by moving clouds made her heart throb more quickly. When the long dark line of a string of animals, or waggons, crawled across the horizon, small in the distance as a line of ants, she held her breath in terror

lest it should draw near. The long horns of her old familiar friends the buffaloes seemed to her fancy like the weapons of the carabineers, and when a shot cracked in a far-off swamp full of water-fowl, her pity and her fear were no longer only for the winged dwellers of Maremma.

It was near the season of the year which she had dreaded for herself. She dreaded it a thousand times more keenly now.

Why was it not the windless, vaporous, silent summer, when all the land was empty, and the great heat lay on it like a pall, covering all the motionless mute figures of the drowsy, sweating cattle and colts dropped down beside some reedy drinking-place—the only multitudes that peopled the great plains of that Etruria which now was dumb as they.

‘If it were but the summer!’ she thought. If it were but the summer there would be no cause to fear, no need to scan the sky-line and gaze apprehensive through the leaves.

But it was once more the month of October, and the time had again come when the Maremma awoke to motion and noise of men. Already the snow upon the Apen-

nines' crests looked like battlements of ivory round about the citadel of God; already axes were ringing, and tree trunks were falling, on the wooded hillsides, shots were cracking over the still lagoons, and birds began to fly with shrill screams from bush and brake. In the distant plains the plough oxen were moving, white and slow, in long and level lines over the rich, moist red earth; amidst the herds of buffalo the rude *buttero* was riding to capture the young bull calves of the year. Countless flocks of sheep and goats came down from the far mountains, and chestnut forests of the north, and wended their way across the grasslands, the shepherd, and his women and children and dogs, dragging their tired limbs in their wake through the pale lilac of the blossoming meadow-mint. On the sea-shore the torpid villages were stirring under the autumnal winds as moles bestir themselves from slumber at the sounds of spring-time; tartanes were loading in the weedy, slimy ports, little lateen craft were home-coming or fitting out, and striped sails were shaking merrily in the rough breeze.

The days passed, and the weeks grew into months, and he became able to leave his

bed of leaves, and help himself and pull himself, leaning against the wall of the tombs, over the floor of rock. He did not dare to see the light of day ; even from his deliverer he was inclined to hide himself as much as it was possible to do ; he was shy and suspicious, like a long-hunted animal that fears even the hand that feeds it, and cannot get over the fear that its friend's hand hides a knife. His brain was weakened like his body by long fasting and suffering ; when he could think calmly he was ashamed of his own fears.

Meanwhile, she was sorely troubled by the simple question of his presence there, more troubled than she would even acknowledge to herself. Not because he was a man, and young and hunted down ; not because she would be taken and punished by the law for harbouring him if the law found him—not for any of these reasons, but because she could not tell how she could maintain him nor how long she could keep his being there unknown. She herself wanted so little ; a few berries, a little grain, a little fruit, and like the birds she was satisfied—when she had an egg and a cup of milk she had a banquet. But how to keep

this stranger, now exhausted by the most enfeebling of all maladies, and who, each day recovering more, would need more nourishment—this was a terrible problem. Yet it never occurred to her to leave him, as she could so easily have done, and go up to the hill-villages, where her spinning and her rush-plaiting would have kept her very well throughout the winter-time, when all busy hands are welcome. She never thought once of deserting him. All at once a duty seemed to her to have sprung out of the earth for her as the orchid sprang out of the rank grass of the moors, to glow on the dulness of her solitary life as the *nupha lutea* gleamed, a cup of virgin gold upon the stagnant pools.

She knew what he wanted, and would want more and more—good red wine and animal flesh—to give him back the strength of which the insidious marsh fever had robbed him, emptying his veins of their blood and health and pouring into them instead its own poison. The nausea of the ghastly malady remained with him after the fever had ceased to consume him as though fire were turning his bones to ashes, as the flame of the woodsmen scorched up the

strong green wood of robur- and sugher-oak into black sticks and shreds of charcoal. Nothing tasted to him welcome or good; it was the sickness of his own palate that would have found disgust in nectar and wormwood in the honey of the moorland thyme-fed bee.

But she did not know that this was but the inevitable result of the blood-poisoning he had suffered; she thought it was because she had only water for him to drink, only such poor simple food to give to him; and she was distressed beyond any power of her own to express the infinite sorrow she felt at her own poverty, her own incapacity to help him better. All this time she never asked him one question as to himself.

Instinctive in her, as his courage is in the boar, and his gladness in the nightingale, was the sense of the sanctity of a fugitive and a guest, and of the shame that would lie in taking advantage of power to force confidence. She longed very greatly to know his history, to learn what woman had brought him to such a pass, but no word of inquiry or hint of one ever passed her lips. He had said that he was guiltless, and she

had said that she believed him: this was enough.

She waited for him of his own free will to tell her more. He did not do so; apathy, and the selfishness of extreme feebleness and misery, kept him mute and indifferent, and absorbed in his own past.

An extreme lassitude and impatience came over him turn by turn; his long malady and his terrible privations had unnerved and paralysed him. Great tears would gather in his eyes and roll down his cheeks. He was heart-sick and bruised, body and soul; and there was no opiate in her pharmacy of simples that could give him rest from his own thoughts. Terror was always with him; and he never escaped from it even in his disturbed and heavy sleep.

As he recovered his strength, this life became irksome and almost unendurable; these darksome chambers of the dead seemed almost as abhorrent to him as the prison cell of Gorgona. There was no change from one morn to another; only when the sun had set did he dare to come to the door of the tomb, and breathe the air, and cast a hurried glance, the glance of the hunted

creature, over the silent and lonesome plains. All that made this silence musical, this loneliness lovely to her, he did not see. When he saw the nocturnal plover winging his slow flight over the marsh, he only envied its power of motion ; when he heard the great boar pushing its heavy body through the brakes of bay, he only fancied it was the tramp of some pursuing force.

The terror of that life was on him ; he had been condemned to thirty years of the chain and the cell. If he were taken, the sentence would not be lessened ; all his manhood would go away in agony, as the captive lion's does. When he should be set free, he would be old, grey-headed, miserable beyond compare ; a childless and friendless outcast, to whom the unfamiliar world would be full of unknown faces, strange voices, alien ways, who would feel in his hideous loneliness that the galleys had been home.

'Take me back !' said the man who was let out of prison when he was seventy years old ; to him the trodden bricks, the bare stone walls, the warder's round, the very chains and bars, were all he had of home.

'What would you do if they took me ?' he asked her once.

‘They should not take us alive,’ she said; and he did not notice how she had identified his fate with her own.

That day she cleaned and burnished and gave a sharper edge to his dagger, and to the long slender stiletto that she always wore inside her girdle.

‘It is all we have,’ she said sorrowfully, thinking of the rifles of the hunters and the carbines of the guards.

Este shuddered.

He recalled the ghastly struggle of unarmed men with full-armed foes, the horrors of that night of insurrection when blood had run like water, and the flash of musketry had blazed through the darkness, and alone he and Saturnino had dropped into the sea, stunned by the blow that water can give a falling man, and long pursued by the roar of the guns of the fort booming dully through the night.

She did not know what such scenes were, but he knew, and he sickened at the memory of them; his nature had made him for languor, rest, and love, not combat; and he knew that when men wish to die they never can.

With a passion that was almost madness,

he longed to escape from the possibility of capture, as strength returned into his limbs and blood, and brought with it all the natural longings and revolt of manhood. He had his dagger close within his bosom : thus, if no other way, he would be free. Musa was right.

But death was terrible to him, even while less terrible than the galleys.

To the sensuous and glad temperament of the Italian, death must ever seem horrible and cruel ; a blank darkness that closes in and ends all things. The love of death, morbid and gloomy, which comes upon the northern is the choice of a man who knows not how to live ; who knows not the delight of love and light ; who has dwelt in mist and in cold, and never has seen the red rose of a woman's mouth, or of a southern dawn, or of a pomegranate flower glowing in the sun.

It is only to those who have never lived that death ever can seem beautiful.

To Este, who had been happy when his mistress kissed him, when his boat floated over the fields of reeds, when the moon came up over the meadows and the waters, and the throb of a lute beat on the soft air like the

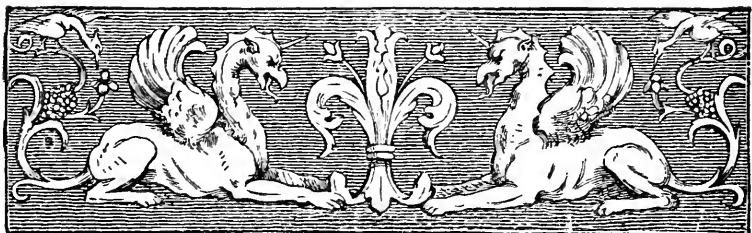
sigh of Aphrodite herself—to Este, the tomb and the galleys were, alike, a yawning void, in which he would sink and perish. The dread of them—a natural dread like that of the Greeks of old—weighed on him and made his sight blind, his ears deaf, his soul insensible.

Scarcely cared he whether it were a youth or a maiden who waited on him with those tall slender limbs, those short curling locks, those grand pitiful eyes.

To get out, to get away, to flee hard and fast over plain and sea, and put all the width of the earth between him and his prison—that was his one thirst, his one dream, his one craze.

He thought only of escape ; meanwhile she thought only of him. She was like the maidens of old to whom a god has descended.

For herself she had had no fear ; but now fear filled all her days with a timidity alien to her temper, that made every rustle of a fox amidst the withered canes, every call of a heron across the marshes, terrible.



CHAPTER XXIV.

ONE day a thought struck her that if she could sell her collection of herbs she could get money, and so get food for him. Joconda never would sell herbs; she gave all away. She had said that God's afflicted were not there for her to make pence out of, and thus to Musa it had always seemed impossible to turn her simples into coin. But now she thought it would be honest dealing; no shame in it, and no robbery. She was glad she had gathered and dried so many plants in the hot autumn weather. She had a large stock of herbs of all kinds, sweet and bitter; some medicinal, some for kitchen uses. Joconda had taught her all their various properties, and in the autumn

of the previous year she had gathered a great store, and dried them and kept them carefully. They were the only things she had to sell; they, and some score of baskets and mats that she had not given to Zefferino.

It was a grand day outside; such days as, here, deck October and November with a glory of colour and of luminance that make all other months of the year seem pale. It was such weather as made her always seek the open air from dawn to dark, beside the sea, or in the brakes and thickets where the wild boar hid.

She determined that she would go to Telamone and try and sell all she had, and bring him back some wine and better food. She was alarmed to see that he remained so weak. It seemed to her so unnatural that a man should lie all the day long listless and dumb with despair, and no more able to move than the pine-tree that the foresters slashed down with their hatchets.

She was alarmed, too, because food there was none, save a little of the oaten bread which she could eat but he could not. Unless she could buy flour she could get nothing better. Of fish he was weary, and

to go out and fish took her as long as it would take to go to the little sea-town.

She went, and told him for whom she slaved that she must be absent some hours. She was going to Telamone.

He was lying on one of the stone couches, in that prostration and silence which had been habitual with him since he had crept off his bed of fever.

He lifted his languid lids, and looked at her with suspicion.

‘Why should you go?’ he said angrily.

‘There is nothing to eat in the place,’ she answered him gently. ‘You want food and you want wine, and I am going to get them both. I will be quick.’

‘How long will you be?’

‘I must be several hours. We are on the moors here; the nearest place is far.’

‘They may take me while you are gone.’

‘There is no fear of that. I will cover the entrance so that a polecat would not find its way down.’

‘That may not prevent——How do you go?’

‘I will walk over to Telamone. It will be nearer so. I had thought of the boat, but it will be nearer across the land.’

He looked at her and let her go in silence.

He was ashamed and afraid to tell her that he doubted her. Even his dazed mind could see that there was no treachery in those clear fearless eyes. Yet all the time she was absent he would doubt her ; strain his ear at every sound, and whet his dagger, the only weapon he had.

She put her herbs in a great frail basket, took the few articles she had made with the reeds and the canes, swung them across her back, and stepped out for the shore.

It was a grand autumnal morning, steeped in the colour and the moisture of late autumn.

The grass was embrowned with the red-brown feathers of the graceful *sanguinella*¹ and the fairy-like sprays of the *tremolino*,² and every moss-grown nook was painted delicately with the exquisite colour of the tender cyclamen-flowers hanging over the moist autumnal earth, leafless, and looking like rose-tinted shells. The golden stars of the dandelions were gleaming everywhere, and above the blossoms of the ivy

¹ *Panicum ciliare*.

² *Briza maxima*.

swarms of wild bees were humming in ecstasy ; but in the water-places the reeds and canes were growing ragged and broken, the nuphar and the nymphæa leaves were getting yellow and torn, and here and there a leaf fluttered from the silver poplar-trees.

To walk against the wind, to feel the wet grass under her feet, to smell the fresh scent of the sods as a troop of young horses galloped past her, scattering the earth with their unshod hoofs in merry scampers, unconscious of the cruel fate—of the whip, and the curb, and the shafts, and the brutal mastery—that waited for them in the future ; all these sights and sounds of nature were such delights that the pressure of anxiety which weighed upon her for the sake of the man she protected was lifted off her as she went ; and her young body, and the heart that beat in it, both felt light as thistle-down.

She saluted all her friends and familiars. She saw the first flight of herons of the year sailing towards the Ciminian range ; she saw a goose alight, jaded after long journeying, and settle, as if with a sigh of content, in a fringe of the red reeds ; she espied some grasshopper warblers in the

sedges, and she saw a water-rail, arrived before his female, look around him, calling, and wearing his little mind out with seeking her high and low upon the waters of his favoured pool, she all the while most likely flying steadily and faithfully towards him, but afar off where he could not see her, and where, perhaps, a shot would lay her low and widow his tender constancy.

All these, and many another welcome and well-known comrade, she saw as she struck across the moors and thickets, and the black heads of the buffaloes pushed themselves up above the red-berried briony, and the wild swine began to sniff for the first acorns of the scarlet-oak, and the beautiful buck fled across the sunlight, made timid in his innocence because man has so much of the devil and spares nothing.

She was so glad to see them all again.

It seemed to her ages since she had been free to run and loiter at choice amidst these green solitudes. But she could only give them a glance and a smile ; she was bound, or she thought so, to be no longer away from the tombs than she could help. Her voluntary loyalty to the man she sheltered was like a chain upon her foot that was

fleet as the roebuck's and had been as free.

She walked on rapidly, and sorely tempted to turn aside into many a leafy defile she knew of, where the hill-hare made its form, to pause beside many a sedge-rimmed shallow where the sultan-hen was splashing. But she resisted the longing to revisit all those beloved haunts that she shared with the winged and the four-footed peoples. She held on straight across the narrow dangerous paths that intersected the marshes, and the cattle-tracks that led through the mazes of under-wood, and after some hours of incessant motion she saw the castle on its headland that marked Telamone. Another hour brought her to its desolate beach, where the ruins of many a Roman villa divide the sand with the stunted aloes and the glazier's weed.

It is a dreary, dirty, miserable place, though in other ages it was decked with the snowy marbles of patrician palaces, and bore, on its then deep waters, the gilded pleasure-galleys of the great Romans.

Here she tried in vain to sell what she had brought ; the few people were too poor

to be willing to spend a bronze coin even, on field medicines which they knew were good. They recognised her and asked her where she had been all this while. She pointed vaguely eastward and told them she had found work to do over yonder, and she only now wished to sell her herbs because she wanted a little money to spend at the autumnal fairs.

This they thought so natural that the Telamone women were willing to help her. They told her of a pharmacy in Orbetello where her simples would be willingly bought, and one of the old men, called Febo, who had his felucca lying off the dirty, shallow port, where once Marius landed with his thousand men, said to her :

‘You used to be a good one on a deck ; I want to go to the Orbetellano ; if you take the tiller, I will carry you there.’

‘That is kind of you,’ she said gratefully.

‘Nay, nay, you will give me something when you have sold your stuff,’ said he. ‘The wind will serve us ; we shall fly. You know the water hereabouts ; you will not run us aground ?’

‘Not I,’ she answered as she sprang on deck.

The little felucca did fly ; these butterfly-like boats are the lightest and the swiftest in the world. A strong wind was blowing from the north-east and made the little sail swell out as if it were a soap-bubble being blown by the children of Glaucus in play.

‘ I shall be so late home ! ’ she thought with a pang as the blue water raced past the sides of the boat, and the sandy shore, and the red tufa hills, and the white vapours rising from the morass, and the stately line of the receding mountains all drifted by her as they went. Her eyes filled as she saw the old stone house where she had dwelt with Joconda standing against the crumbling quay of Santa Tarsilla, whose stones were fewer every year as the rains soaked them, and the weeds dragged them down, and the stormy water sapped their base.

‘ Andrea is always alive ? ’ she asked of the old man with her.

He chuckled, ‘ Ay, ay, always. We old blasted sea-pines are hard to kill ; all the sap has been run out of us, but we hold fast on the sand. I am eighty years old, and Andreino he must be going on for a hundred, but we are alive, we can suck our

pipe-stems still ; and there were two youngsters from the Lucchese just come down here who died last week like flies, just of our air and our smoking soil. You die early, or never, here.'

She did not answer him. The words sent a chill through her blood ; she thought of the man at home. He was young and of the blood of the north ; the fever had eaten all the life out of him, and it was still very possible that he never would rally entirely, but would sink away out of apathy into death, as slowly and as surely as the sea was sinking away from the shore and leaving disease and desolation, where once the coral had grown and the dianthus spread his pale pink plumes.

The old sailor mumbled and chattered on of the seaboard as he had remembered it, and the time when he had known the great works begun in 1829 for the drying up of the Castiglione lagoon (once so fair and harmless a lake that we know from Cicero rich men coveted an island on it), and chuckled to himself over his prediction that the *bonificazione* that was still going on would be only so much squandering of money and labour, and that the salt and

fresh water would always manage to meet, all engineers notwithstanding, and that they would repent ever having meddled with the ways of God and the course of the Ombrone, and that he for his part should be glad to see the houses of the Pescaja sink down into the swamp, for he liked not such meddling with the shape of the earth and the run of the rivers; and he expected heaven's vengeance yet.

Musa listened inattentively, though his views were her own, for she too hated 'the meddling' with the streams and the waves, the dykes and the locks that shut out the sea, the drainage that killed the little fish and the reeds and the brilliant marsh flora, and the men who would fain make a dry place, and build a factory, or a foundry, where the bulrushes now nodded to their own reflection in the water and the birds from the north found food and shelter.

Almost as quickly as a storm-gull could have flown there, the felucca sailed over the ten odd miles that part Telamone from Monte Argentaro, and, drawing so little water, ran easily in over the sandy bottom and through the submerged fields of algæ into the *stagno*, and lay to underneath the huge block of the Pelasgic sea-wall.

Then ruin seemed to menace her, for she was stopped on landing by the customs-takers, and toll and fee were imperiously demanded for her bundles of herbs and her frail baskets, and she had not a single coin upon her! She had not one in the world, indeed, for Zefferino had always paid her by barter for whatever he sold for her, and had brought her food or oil or flax or wool, and never any money.

As a great favour and goodness, the guards at last, after debating and scolding half an hour, agreed to take two of her baskets in lieu of the number of centimes that she ought to have paid to the State.

‘Eh, Musoncella,’ said old Febo, tugging her sleeve as they landed, and pointing to a proclamation pasted on the water-walls, ‘can you read that? I cannot. They say there is money to be made. You who are always roaming, you may come across that man they want.’

She looked where he pointed; and went up to the big printed letters and spelled them out slowly, not being skilful in reading.

Her heart beat fast; her eyes seemed to grow for the moment blind.

The State offered a large reward in money to any one who should aid in the discovery and apprehension of the Count Luitbrand d'Este, escaped from the prisons of Gorgona fifteen months before.

The proclamation had been pasted up, and torn down, or defaced, and put up again, some hundred times since the summer night when the galley-slaves had dropped off the rocks into the deep water and swum for their lives, with the musket-balls raining around them and hissing in the sea.

The people of the Orbetellano had more sympathy with the fugitives than with the authorities, and thought that the young man was hardly dealt with : 'Poor lad ! It was only a love murder,' they said pityingly. 'After all, if you are jealous and stab your *dama*, you do what is but natural. Does not the stork kill the faithless mate ? So they say.'

She read it ; but she had self-control enough to let no emotion betray her ; side by side with strong passions in her went strong self-command and power of silence.

'I should think,' she said indifferently, turning to Febo, 'that they might be pretty sure that the marshes have killed this poor youth.'

What will you do, Febo, if they should take to offering rewards for whoever will tell of contraband goods run ashore to Maremma?’

She smiled slowly as she said it, and the old man winced.

‘Hold your tongue,’ he said angrily, ‘and with these *doganieri*—burn them!—so near; are you mad? Come, let us go and find your pharmacy.’

She was free to go into the town, which to her seemed a large bewildering place, enclosed as it was between its stone fortifications and its sea-walls. She had never been there before, and she had the true mountain and moorland instincts of distrust and hatred for all places where men dwelt in numbers, cooped up in stone or brick compartments, and shut out by tiles and timber from the sight of the sky.

The men began to stare at her and make admiring jests; she pulled further over her head the woollen hood which Joconda had always enjoined on her to cover herself with if she went amidst a crowd; and laden with her goods she set to work to find out the pharmacy, and did find it in time, though with trouble.

It was a little dark vaulted place, made

out of no one knew what old ruin of Roman work.

She knocked and went in boldly, and found an old chemist, who was the leech of half the Orbetellano, and far more trusted by the people than the youth with many greater accredited qualifications who was set by the municipal rule to cure their ills as parish doctor and surgeon.

The chemist was a wise and kindly person, curing chiefly by those herbs which modern medicine neglects, to ransack nature for minerals and poisons. He was liberal and could afford to be so, for he had a large following in the maritime population, and when the haul was large after the night's fishing those men were open-handed. He was pleased to see so rare and large a store of the most useful plants, and said so honestly, and questioned her where she found them, and asked her how much she wanted for them.

‘I want quinine, not money,’ she answered him, ‘but if you can give me money too, I shall be glad; I have none, and I want to get wine as well.’

‘You have some one sick? A father? A brother?’

‘I have some one who has been sick,’ she answered curtly. ‘But he is only weak now. But it is such weakness!—it is like death.’

‘He has had the fever?’

‘Yes. Quinine is what he should have, is it not? You would know.’

‘Quinine and pure wine. I will give you both for your herbs; and as for those baskets, I dare say my wife will take them.’

He called his wife, and she haggled more than he liked over the baskets, but at last consented to buy the lot. Frail baskets are much in favour here, and are used by women marketing, by masons and carpenters for their tools, by anybody who has to carry anything and can carry it with most ease thus.

The wife gave her a handful of bronze pence for the lot, and knew she could sell them again for as many silver ones. The chemist put up quinine in two large phials, and three flasks of pure Campagna wine.

‘That is strong and good red *Lacrima*,’ he said to her. ‘That will pour life into your sick man as the sunbeams pour colour into the green fruit. As for the quinine—you can read?—then give it him as I have

written on the phials, and if that do not cure him, nothing will, but our Maremma will take him to herself as she takes so many. Can you carry those flasks? See, sling them together so ; and when you have other simples to sell, bring them to me. They are God's own medicines.'

She thanked him and went out ; at the door he slipped a little money in her hand.

'You were not paid enough for your baskets, my dear ; and get your sick man some meat with that.'

'I will bring you the rarest plants in all Maremma,' she said, with a tremor in her voice, 'and you shall pay me nothing at all for them. You are good.'

Ashamed of her emotion, she ran away up the little dark twisting street.

At the end of it, the old owner of the felucca was waiting.

'You will give me something now,' he said ; 'you have done well.'

'I will pay you when we are back at Telamone,' she said, knowing her people.

'Oh, no, indeed,' said the old fellow angrily ; 'that will not do at all. In the first place, I am not going back. My son

lives here and we go harpooning to-night. You must pay me now.'

'I have no right to pay you. You were coming, and you said I might steer. And how shall I get back without the felucca? You will let me have the felucca at least? I can manage her all alone quite well.'

'Eh, eh, Musoncella!' grinned the old man, 'you will not pay for the voyage here, and you think I shall trust you with my boat? I go out in her to-night myself; that is why I came. Pay me now, or I will make it worse for you; and if I call a guard, then I shall know where you really live, for it is my belief——'

'What will content you?' she said in desperation, feeling her cheeks grow cold with fear.

'Pay him nothing,' said a voice behind her, and turning she saw the face of Daniello Villamagna, the Sicilian skipper. 'Pay him nothing, and let him stay here with his cockle-shell. The "*Ausiliatrice*" will land you where you will.'

'Oh, I was only joking,' said the old sailor, for he knew the skipper of the '*Ausiliatrice*,' and knew his tongue was hot and his knife not very slow to back up what

his tongue spoke, and he had no wish to come in collision with this son of the lava of Ætna.

Musa looked from one to the other doubtfully. She was sorry to see Daniello Villamagna there.

‘You will let me have your boat,’ she said, in a low tone imploringly to the man of Telamone. ‘Pray let me have it. It will be quite safe with me, and I will give you silver for its use.’

‘Oh no ; that I cannot anyhow,’ said the man ; ‘I go out to-night—I have promised my son.’

‘My brig is off the *stagno* ; she cannot come in, there is no draught for her. But if you will come out to her she shall land you where you choose,’ said the Sicilian.

‘I can hire a boat on the *stagno*,’ said Musa, and she turned away from them both and began to make her way back to the port, pausing at a butcher’s stall to buy some sound fresh meat, as the chemist had bade her do.

The Sicilian sailor followed her ; he looked amidst the yellow faces and the yellow sands of Orbetello like a native of

some other planet ; his warm brown cheeks, his brilliant eyes, his elasticity of step, his rapid movements, were all the signs of a perfect health and a dauntless manhood ; a scarlet cap upon his black curls, and a scarlet kerchief at his shapely throat, caught the sunshine as he went. His glance was full of triumph and gladness.

‘Eh, Musoncella !’ he murmured. ‘You see I kept my word. I am back in four months. I was coming to you.’

She felt the great dread tighten at her heart.

‘How should you come to me?’ she said, with assumed indifference. ‘You cannot tell where to find me.’

‘I should soon find you ; there are not two like you on these shores. Have you ever thought of what I said to you?’

‘No. Why should I think of it?’

‘I have thought of nothing else night and day. I love you!——’

‘That is nonsense. I can be nothing to you. Why will you walk through the streets with me? I dislike it.’

‘You never remembered me, never once?’

‘Why should I?’

‘Ah, Musoncella! The old man called you aright.’

She smiled superbly.

‘They have always called me that.’

‘But if you would listen,’ he pursued, the passionate blood flushing his clear brown skin, ‘I am no poor, sickly, dawdling Maremmano, and my brig—she is as good a barque as the high seas hold. And Sicily is beautiful, and at home we laugh and sing and dance all day; and my people are merry and good, and we are well enough off to deny ourselves nothing in reason. And in Sicily the men are strong, and the maidens gay. You would be happy there. I love you! I have seen nothing but your face; it was always between me and the great tumbling Biscay breakers, and the thick white fogs of that Scottish coast, where once nearly we foundered, and went to pieces, for the fog there is like a wall, and the very lightship is hidden in it——ah, you do not listen; you do not care. Yet heaven is my witness; if you will, I will prove my love in every honest way before men and the saints, and I will take you back with me to the island and be more proud than if my hold were

filled with gold and silver. And if you doubt what I say and what I am, you can ask the syndie of this very town, for he has known me and my people many years, since my father traded here——’

Musa only tried to move faster before him.

‘You are mad, I think,’ she said angrily. She thought he was. A man to talk thus who had only seen her once before for five minutes, on a summer morning, upon the sands!

In vain he urged, in vain he pleaded; he could make no impression upon her as he walked beside her, pouring out his full heart in words as the nightingale pours his in song. He was vehemently in earnest; he cared nothing for who she might be, nor whence she came: he wanted her, this strong and fearless and beautiful creature! What a mother she would be for sea-born children cradled by the winds and waves!

He might as well have spoken to a figure of bronze for aught that she was moved by it.

She scarcely heard him; she was thinking every moment of the fugitive hidden in

the tombs of the rocks: was he safe? did he want for anything in her absence? might faintness overcome him and, without succour, pass into the endless swoon of death? if he were well, was he wondering why she was so long, was he doubting her? would the old man of Telamone talk of her and cause her refuge to be found?

All these anxieties were torturing her; what cared she for a foolish, fire-tongued Sicilian who doubtless said all those fine phrases to somebody in every port at which the 'Ausiliatrice' touched?

Soon they had threaded the dirty streets and come out upon the harbour. It was a busy day; fishermen by the hundred sat on the sea walls, or swarmed on the narrow tongues of land that join Argentaro with the mainland; the harpooning of the night was to be on a large scale, shoals of fish had been seen, and, less welcome, several large sharks. The men were telling long and grim shark stories one to another; the fishing fleet was all ready and anchored, but the fishing had to wait for the dark of the moonless night.

One part of the sea-wall had been recently washed down during a tempest;

those huge blocks of Pelasgic or Tyrrhene architecture have seen the storms of centuries when Alexander was yet unborn and Christ and Cæsar names unknown. Three thousand years and more the sea has raged at them in its furies of autumn and of winter, but it has only been able to displace, never been able to destroy them.

At these vast blocks, which tax the strength of yoked oxen, a gang of galley-slaves was working ; the overseer was near them with his whip, as though they were wild beasts of an arena and he their tamer.

One of them, a Hercules in build, and burnt black with the sun on all his naked limbs and throat, looked up and saw her and knew her.

It was Saturnino. He had not yet been moved from Orbetello since his capture there.

She looked at the great black figure of the man with a pity that quenched the scorn she had always felt for the baseness of his theft. She knew his story : the great Saturnino as the country side still called him ! And he was working there as elephants do in timber-gangs, old before his time, calcined with sun and powder, bent but massive still, with

angry, sullen, bloodshot eyes gleaming like a lion's out from his black bent brows.

She pitied him, and that pity came back like dew on her own heart. Almost she loved this cruel, savage, brute-like creature, stained with so much blood, burdened with so many crimes. Had he not sent her Este!

That memory made her eyes soft as they dwelt on him; he saw their softness, and deep down in his fierce, ravenous, sullen heart he was glad.

‘Does she know I robbed her tomb?’ he thought—galley-slaves hear nothing.

On an instinct of pity she paused beside him a moment.

He had taken the gold of the tomb, and he was for that accursed, and he had betrayed and wronged her shelter of him, and when she had heard of his capture she had been ferocious in her triumph. Yet now that she saw him she was sorry; sorry as she felt for the great boar when she saw him plunge through the rushes bleeding and torn, with the hounds at his flanks and the steam of his panting lungs coming like smoke from his red tongue.

She longed to say a syllable to tell him that his companion in flight was safe with

her, but she dared not lest others should overhear. She nevertheless paused by him one moment and slipped one of the silver coins the chemist had given her into his hand.

‘Yes; I know,’ she murmured, answering the guilty interrogation of his eyes. ‘You robbed the dead. That was worse than robbing me. But I think they would forgive—now.’

Something in the tone of her voice brought to him the echo of a voice that he had loved; the voice of Serapia.

He put her coin between his teeth in silence. Then, as he looked up and saw her standing in the full daylight, with bare head and throat, something in her aspect and her features stirred memory in his brain.

He seemed to see his own face in the innocence of its adolescence as it had looked back at him mirrored in some hillside pool in that season of his boyhood when no blood was on his hands, no price was on his head.

A thrill of remembrance, a throb of wonder, stirred the sluggish apathy into which his ferocious passions had sunk under the drugs of monotony, inactivity, and despair.

He had become half madman, half brute, the dullest, most savage, most hopeless unit of all that hopeless world to which he now belonged. But for that one moment humanity stirred in him—he was a man once more.

He remembered the little child that he had left under the stone-pines on the crags above the Fiora torrents.

He sprang forward, he cried out, the whip of the overseer lashed him back into the ranks, the guards hustled him with oaths into silence.

Musa passed on, going she knew not where.

Daniello Villamagna looked hard at her.

‘You did not turn your face from that hound,’ he said jealously.

‘He is a hound chained, and so to be pitied,’ she answered him.

‘He was the robber of Santa Fiora.’

‘I know.’

Her face was sad and anxious; she was thinking of him who had been sent to her by Saturnino.

Out in the deeper water beyond the Argentaro rocks the Sicilian brig was at anchor; a trim vessel still, though she had

been buffeted about in the mists and storms off the Scottish shores.

Daniello pointed to her where she lay rocking gently on the wondrous blue of the Archipelago.

‘If you will come out to her,’ he said softly, and more timidly than he had spoken before, ‘I swear on the good faith of a sailor to put you ashore where you will, and to speak no word whilst you are on my deck of what you do not choose to hear.’

‘I can hire a boat,’ said Musa, and she turned and tried to bargain with a ragged lad who had an old punt there beneath the wall. But the youth would not be hired or bribed; there was the night-spearing to be seen and shared; no man or boy would leave Orbetello with that prospect of delight in store for the evening as soon as the slender crescent of the young moon should have vanished.

‘You will get no boat here,’ said Daniello. ‘Not one of them will stir this afternoon. Since you are distrustful of the “Ausiliatrice” hear this: yonder is my own boat, with which I pulled from the ship here; there are some of my crew about; you could not row that boat yourself, but I

will send the best man I have with you wherever you want to go.'

She was silent.

'I will not come with you myself,' he added, 'since you flout and hate me so. But remember what I have said, and I shall see you and say it again.'

She was still silent; she could not bear to owe him a service, but there was something in this generosity of his action which touched her as all his amatory eloquence had had no power to do. She could not endure to use his boat, yet unless she did so she could never reach home that night, and what would Este think of her? What might not happen to him, alone, and feeble, and without food?

As she hesitated, the Sicilian shouted to a sailor on the little isthmus of sand; his own boatswain, a man of years and one to be trusted. The boatswain ran to his call, and Daniello whispered to him. A long slim boat was soon aground against the sand.

'That will take you where you wish to go,' he said, and his large black eyes gazed on her with a reproach that dimmed their fire and light.

She looked at him with a certain shame.

‘I am thankful to you,’ she said simply. ‘But give me your word first that when I land your sailor shall not follow me.’

‘Sailors are not spies,’ said the Silician with a haughty anger. ‘No; I take no unfair means. But we shall meet again. It is written.’

‘Farewell,’ she said to him, and she sprang into the boat, and took the tiller-cords.

For herself she would not have done it. For herself she would rather have run all the certain dangers of night upon the moors than have incurred this debt to the man whose frank fair passion seemed to her an intolerable offence. But, left to herself, she knew she could never reach Telamone, much less the sepulchres, that night; already the sun was slanting towards the sea, already the glowing amber of his afternoon beams was falling like molten gold upon the many-coloured sails of the numerous fishing craft that lay close in to shore upon the salt-water lagoon, and further out under the shadow of the twin-peaked rocks.

The boatswain pulled with long and steady stroke against the nor'-wester that was blowing still. It was Ave Maria when she reached Telamone. The mariner carried

out his orders strictly, and when he ran her into the harbour never asked her a word, but turned his boat's head with a cheery 'good-night,' and sculled himself back again towards the south.

It was vesper-time and in another moment would be night. She got through the little town as quickly as she could, holding the precious medicine closer in her bosom, for quinine was coveted there like the very elixir of life. She had eight or nine miles of moor and hill and woodland and marsh before her still; but she was not afraid, once in her own country as she called it. Of the less known lands around Telamone she was less confident.

She had her knife slipped, safe and secret, in her garter and a bold heart in her breast; she walked on without pausing, through the damp warm night, full of vapour, only just rustled by the wind from the north, which, though it was strong and high upon the sea, had little power over the low and close-woven foliage. She met nothing worse, however, than a mounted buffalo-driver, who swore at her because the lantern she had lit to save herself from straying into the swamps had frightened

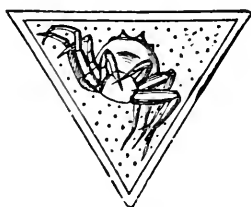
the horse he rode ; and all her furred and feathered friends of the season who liked to hunt and travel by night ; the grand-dukes and the smaller owls, were out, of course, and all the various races of the snipe tribe were busy after molluscs or mice, larvæ, or frogs, according to their size and prowess ; the moor fox was stealing through the osiers to where the moorhen slept, and the first wild ducks of the year flew by against the slender horns of a new moon. Once a great dark bird sailed over her head so near that she could almost have touched him ; it was a belated booted-eagle going from his summer haunts on Monte Amiato to his Asian or African eyrie on Himalaya or on Atlas.

Save these she met nothing.

Men do not care to be out on the Maremma lowlands after sunset ; every pretty brown tarn reflecting clouds and stars may be a poison-bowl of noxious gases ; every will-o'-the-wisp that dances over the hairy sundew and the vernal sandwort may be a torch that leads on to the grave.

She met no creature to do her harm, and knew her country so well that she did not lose her way or miss the unsteady

bridge that oftentimes the rough tussocks of grass alone offered as passage across some marsh that was like a soaking sponge. It was midnight, she thought by the skies, when she reached the tombs and knocked aloud at the stone doors, and called with a tired but happy voice, 'Open ! it is I !'





CHAPTER XXV.

ALL this day and evening Este had passed in the alternate stupor and agitation of great fear. Against his judgment, against his manliness, he could not conquer the idea that she had gone to give him up to the law. He was very feeble; the simple fare that kept her in health had no power to restore the lost strength to his muscles or vivify his impoverished blood. He had nothing to do the whole day long; the gloom of the sepulchres, from which he dared not stir, oppressed him like a nightmare. His weak pulse beat fast with terror as he said in his soul, 'she is gone to tell them. She will never come back. She will only send the soldiers.'

When he heard her voice he could have screamed for gladness. When he saw her enter with the flasks of wine on her shoulders he laughed for very joy and kissed her feet for shame.

‘I have brought the quinine and good *Lacrima*,’ she said to him joyfully, yet with a tinge of reproachfulness in her voice. ‘Why did you doubt me? I do not tell lies.’

‘Forgive me! Hunted creatures doubt their own shadows. You sold the herbs well, then?’

‘Ah, yes! so well, and to a kind old man who promised me that these would soon give you back your strength.’

‘You never told him of me?’

‘I did not tell him of you, of course; only that some one had had the marsh-fever and could not get health again. I had to go to Orbetello; that is what has made me so late.’

‘What can I say to you? How can I repay you?’

‘Ah! I want nothing but to see you well. You have suffered so long and so much.’

‘Yes, I have suffered. But I do not see why you should care,’ he said, using the

same words that she had spoken to Maurice Sanctis.

She said nothing, but poured him out some of the rich red wine, which he drank eagerly.

‘It is like drinking sunbeams,’ he said, with the first smile that had dawned on his wasted features. ‘Tell me, how could you get to Orbetello?’

‘Febo, a fisherman of Telamone, took me there.’

‘But he will suspect?—’

‘Nothing—he is stupid, and, if he did, he knows that I know he smuggles goods from Sardinia; he will hold his tongue about me.’

‘There are many smugglers on the coast?’

‘There are few people, but all the men that there are do smuggle—from the islands chiefly, to escape the customs dues. Why not? Do you know that when a Tuscan labourer comes back from working in Sardinia they make him pay duty on his Sardinian wooden shoes?’

He was silent; he was pondering whether one of those smugglers would take him across to France. But he had no

money to offer as a bribe, and the crime of which he had been accused was one for which any country would surrender him up to undergo his sentence in his own land.

‘You are very good to me,’ he said with emotion as he saw her rake together the embers of the fire and begin to prepare his evening meal.

‘I do not know that!’ said Musa, and turned on him her luminous eyes that were like those of Carlo’s divine messengers. ‘I am sorry for you, and you have no one else.’

For the first time, the glance of her eyes startled him into perception of her as a young girl.

‘Are you not afraid to come and go like this, alone?’

‘I have my knife,’ she said curtly; then, tired as she was, she turned away to light wood for a fire, and put the meat she had brought into water, making graceful this homely work by her own simplicity and grace as women did in days of old, when great Demeter herself thought household cares no shame.

He sat by the blazing wood and cones of pine and watched her; for the first time

sensible of her beauty, for the first time also grateful for all she did for him.

It was she who gathered the wood and the fir apples; it was she who cut the dry heather to keep for fuel; it was she who fished, who span, who worked in all ways, who brought heavy loads upon her shoulders and shared her refuge with him, disdaining any personal fear or harm. It seemed to him that he ought to rise and go out into the daylight amongst men at all peril rather than bring risk and toil upon a woman—a girl—thus.

She appeared to divine his thoughts, for she spoke to him across the stone chamber of the Lucumo :

‘I do not know that it is safe for you to be in this first room. I heard to-day in Orbetello that there is a reward up for you, and they say soldiers have come anew to the fort at Santa Tarsilla; there never have been any there in my remembrance.’

He shivered a little.

‘A reward? You saw it?’

‘Yes, for you; it describes you. And Febo said to me—“If you see yon poor soul on your moorlands there are gold and silver to be made.”’

‘ And what did you answer him ? ’

‘ I told him he knew I was no trapper of birds or beasts. I thought it best to tell you this, because you must hide more carefully; the inner rooms are safest. They call you in that printing on the walls Count d’Este. You did not call yourself so ? ’

‘ Men call me so,’ he said, wearily, ‘ or did so until I became a mere number amongst slaves.’

‘ That is a title, is it not ? ’

‘ A title, barren as the honourable names written under the paintings of these tombs ! We were a branch of the Este of Ferrara, the great Este—the mightiest lords there were ever, save the Gonzaga and the Montefeltro. That is of no good now. All we have is a damp, ruined palace in Mantua, a few breadths of water-meadows ; beyond Bergamo there is a little city on a rock—men come to it for its arts and architecture—that once was ours. Now we do not own a brick within its walls, and it is only remembered by travellers now and then because its houses are Bramante’s and Sansovino’s, and its altars are Giovanni Bellini’s. We are almost as dead, almost as forgotten, as your Etruscans here.’

‘You know who they were?’ she said under her breath, as she spoke of her lost people. ‘Tell me of them? When first I entered here, there was a king in golden armour, and with a golden helmet, lying there, just there; and as the light touched him the gold melted and he fled——’

‘They were a great people, and they perished,’ he answered her; ‘their clay vases survive, but they are gone, obliterated, passed into nothingness. Now and then men find a wall of huge stones; a gateway hard and black as iron; a sepulchre full of gold and pottery. Then they say these were Etruscan. But when that is said, it is but a word; we know but little.’

‘They were greater than the men that live now,’ she said, with a solemn tenderness.

‘Perhaps; why think you so?’

‘Because they were not afraid of their dead; they built them beautiful houses and gave them beautiful things. Now, men are afraid or ashamed, or they have no remembrance. Their dead are huddled away in dust or mud as though they were hateful or sinful. That is what I think so cowardly, so thankless. If they will not bear the sight of death, it were better to let great

ships go slowly out, far out to sea, and give the waves their lost ones.'

'Great ships whose freights should be death? Yes; the thought is fine. Would you mantle them with black like the homeward-coming vessels of Theseus? They should be the sailing ships of old, with "canvas stately in the wind," and their masts twined with myrtle, Greek-like——'

'Tell me more of them?' she said softly, motioning with her hand to the painted shapes upon the walls dimly glimmering into colour here and there as the lamp-light touched them.

'There is so little! My own Mantua was once theirs, named from their Mantus, that grim god of the land of shades—you see him yonder—we Latins called him Pluto. With other names, their deities and ours were all the same.'

'But was Christ amongst them?'

'No, dear; Christ was not born of a woman until this nation had been beaten, captured, absorbed, trodden under the iron heel of Rome. Christianity is a thing of yesterday; it looks beside Etruscan creeds as this year's bulrush beside the holm oak of the hills.'

‘And where are those earlier gods?’

‘Around us still; they are the unknown forces, the unalterable fates, that rule us then as now. What matter whether I called you Luna, or Cupra, or Hera, or Juno, or Musa; you would be yourself always, and always beautiful, as your marsh-lilies are that glow in gold upon the swamp.’

For the first time in all her seventeen years of life her face grew warm with a quick blush.

‘I am not handsome,’ she said, quickly. ‘They call me Musoncella, the ugly face, always on the shore. If you want what is handsome you should see Giano’s Mariannina; she has hair like the scales of the gold and red mullet.’

‘I do not want Giano’s Mariannina!’ he said, with a soft intonation that escaped her.

‘Well, she would be of no use here,’ she answered him literally. ‘She thinks of nothing all day but “gilding” her hair in the sun and getting bits of coral.’

Then she devoted her care to the meat broth she was setting on the wood fire in a bronze bowl; his heavy eyes watched her as she bent over the ruddy gleam from the crackling heather.

‘You must be tired,’ he said, with sudden perception of his own selfishness. ‘Go and rest, my dear ; pray go. I can wait very well for the broth until morning.’

‘Oh no. You shall have it as soon as the fire will stew it. I am not greatly tired. You know I am made of strong stuff, and I rested in the boats.’

He did not urge her more.

As she sat by the fire she took some of her oaten bread, and some water, and made her supper of them, sitting beside the burning wood that sent out resinous odours as it burned.

‘I ought to tell you why I am accused of this crime and condemned for it,’ he said abruptly, after long silence. ‘You ought to know—you who do so much for me on trust. You have a right to hear why they hunt me down as a murderer.’

‘Do not tell it if it hurt you,’ said Musa, as he paused. She saw that he shrank from telling the tale ; and the temptation that was too strong for Psyche had never assailed her yet.

‘Yes ; you have a right to know. After all, it was ruin to me, but it is not much of a story ; a tale-teller with his guitar on a

vintage night would soon make a better one. I loved a woman. She lived in Mantua. So did I, too. For her sake I lost three whole years—three years of the best of my life. And yet, what is gain except love, and what better than joy can we have? A pomegranate is ripe but once. And I—my pomegranate is rotten for evermore! We lived in Mantua. It is a strange sad place. It was great and gay enough once. Grander pomp than Mantua's there was never known in Italy. Felix Mantua!—and now it is all decaying, mouldering, sinking, fading; it is silent as death; the mists, the waters, the empty palaces, the walls that the marshes are eating little by little every day, the grass and the moss and the wild birds' nests on the roofs, on the temples, on the bridges, all are desolate in Mantua now. Yet is it beautiful in its loneliness, when the sunrise comes over the seas of reeds, and the towers and the arches are reflected in the pools and streams; and yet again at night, when the moon is high and the lagoons are as sheets of silver, and the shadows come and go over the bulrushes and S. Andrea lifts itself against the stars. Yes; then it is still Mantova la Gloriosa.'

His voice dropped ; the tears came into his closing eyes as though he looked on the dead face of a familiar friend.

He felt the home sickness of the exile, of the wanderer who knows not where to lay his head.

The glory was gone from the city.

Its greatness was but as a ghost that glided through its deserted streets calling in vain on dead men to arise.

The rough red sail of the fishing boat was alone on the waters once crowded with the silken sails of gilded galleys ; the toad croaked and the stork made her nest where the lords of Gonzaga had gone forth to meet their brides of Este or of Medici ; Virgil, Alboin, great Karl, Otho, Petrarca, Ariosto, had passed by here over this world of waters and become no more than dreams ; and the vapours and the dust together had stolen the smile from Giulio's Psyche, and the light from Mantegna's arabesques. On the vast walls the grass grew, and in the palaces of princes the winds wandered and the beggars slept. All was still, disarmed, lonely, forgotten ; left to a silence like the silence of the endless night of death. Yet it was dear to him ; this sad and stately city, waiting for

the slow death of an unpitied and lingering decay.

It was dear to him from habit, from birth, from memory, from affinity, as the reeds of its stagnant waters were dear to the sedge-warbler that hung its slender nest on the stem of a rush. A price was set on his head; and never more, he thought, would he see the sunshine in ripples of gold come over the grey lagoons.

With an effort he took up his tale.

‘We dwelt in Mantua. She was another man’s wife. It is a common story. She was—nay, I cannot tell you what she was. Gather a lily in its whiteness and steep it in the sunset, and you will see something like her. She was of noble blood; the people always called her Donna Aloysia, as though she were a prince’s daughter. She was poor—every one is poor there—but when she sat at her barred casement, with her mandoline leaning idle against her breast, she was a wife for Gonzaga’s self; and her lord was an old, wizen, dull, and pitiful wretch—a judge of one of the petty courts there. So we loved one another. When the night fell, I rowed beneath her tower windows; if she were alone, there was a

knot of flowers at the bars, and a lamp behind them ; if all were dark, I stole away and hid amongst the reeds. So three years went by—you do not seem to understand ! We were happy ; we would have had nothing otherwise. All the stillness, and the gloom, and the hush of the close streets, and the noiseless pathways of the waters, all seemed made to make our lives the sweeter and the closer-knit. You do not seem to understand—you have never loved any one ?’

‘ Only Joconda.’

‘ Joconda ! I speak to you, then, in an unknown tongue. We were happy. Three summers went by. One night in August I rowed under her wall. The lamp was in the window behind the knot of jessamine and datura. The cord hung down from the bars ; I tied my boat, and moored it as usual. As usual I swung myself up the rope, and entered her room by loosening one bar of the grating, which we had filed through long before. Whenever I shut my eyes, in thought or sleep, I see the pale, wide waters, the waving reeds, the white light of the full moon ; I hear the hooting of the mosquito-clouds, the lap of the water on the wall, the great bells of the city which

tolled midnight. I smell the scent of the creamy daturas and the jessamine flower as I brushed them down in my haste and my joy. They are always with me—always. When I lie in my grave I think they will be with me there. The room was light with the light of the moon. I saw her lying on the bed asleep—the great old bed that had once been Isabella d'Este's, with its velvet baldacchino and its gilded angels—but she had no kiss for me, no look, no murmur of delight. She was still, quite still, and on her breast, under a cluster of the datura lilies, there was a deep, dark gap, and a stream of blood was running slowly—oh, so slowly!—over the linen on to the marble floor. For, you see, she was dead. There was a three-edged dagger on the couch; a dagger of mine. I took it up. I understood. Jealousy had killed her and had used my weapon; jealousy has killed its thousands and its tens of thousands. At that moment men seized me. I know nothing more. When I came back to any sight or sense I was in prison, charged with the assassination of my mistress, Donna Aloysia Gorgias, wife of Piero di Albano.'

He ceased, and buried his face upon his

hands. Musa listened, her eyes dilated with wonder, fear, and awe; her colour changing with unspoken sympathy, that was at once too timid and too strong for words.

‘Who had killed her?’ she asked at last.

‘Her husband. Of that I am as sure as that the sun hangs in the heavens. He had a double vengeance so. I could but deny; I had no proof of innocence. Adultery with her was proven on me, and he, a man versed for many years in all the crafts of law, easily worsted me, delirious with the misery of her loss as I was then. Some furious words that I had been overheard to speak to her at a masked fête a few nights before, because she smiled more than I chose upon a youngster, were brought against me. My family were poor and proud, and ill-liked in Lombardy. They condemned me as guilty of her murder, and sentenced me to the galleys for thirty years. Thirty years! That is my tale. Well, no doubt in a way I murdered her, for she was slaughtered through our love.’

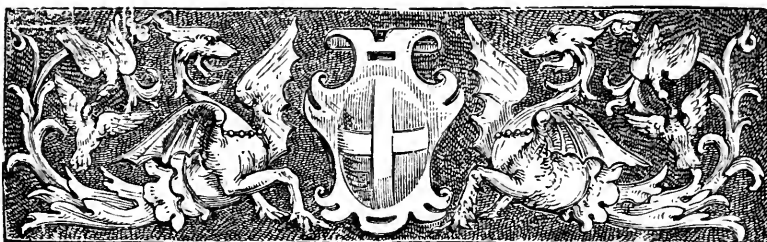
He was silent again; his head was sunk upon his arms; he had forgotten all except those nights in Mantua.

She was silent too. She was troubled

by the ghastly story. Passion and death seemed to pass by her like the scorch of fire, like the chill of a grave.

‘Does that old wicked man still live?’ she asked.

‘No doubt. He had his vengeance. After love it is the sweetest thing on earth. I know not how I came to touch the dagger, the foul thing, but being thus found with it in my hand was proof enough for the dolts who were my jury. Besides, old Piero di Albano was a man of weight in our poor ruined city, and I was an idler and a titled beggar. So he had his way. He laid her in her grave with a black cruel hole in her beautiful breast, and he sent me out amongst felons, to parch my life away like a dog chained in the sun, without a drop of water near, who looks up at the hot brazen skies till he is mad. Whilst I was in my cell a written paper, unsigned, was brought to me, which told me she had been as faithless to me as to her lord. It might be so; I know not. Or it might be but her husband’s lie. This I know—love is a sorcerer’s poison. It burns the brain to ashes, and shrivels the soul up in its heat, till it is no more than the cast coat of the tree-cricket.’



CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN Daniello Villamagna saw his boat go out of the lagoon of Orbetello bearing her with it, he looked after it as long as he could see its path over the water, that was growing lilac and purple under the after-glow of the west. Then he retraced his steps slowly towards the town. The galley-slaves were still at work ; the labour at the sea-wall was urgent, and they would be kept at it by lantern-light. There was a score of them. They were all there until the State should have decided whether to send them to inland or island prisons, or to the mines, or to public labours on the coast.

Daniello looked curiously at the one amidst them to whom she had spoken.

Saturnino Mastarna looked in turn at him, with a hungry, longing look.

‘You know her?’ he muttered, very low, as the sailor passed him.

Daniello, eager to catch a hint or a sign, with his quick, ardent southern mind, murmured back to him :

‘What is she to you—tell me?’

‘I am her father,’ answered the galley-slave ; ‘and he bent his shoulders to the rope-yoke with which he and five of his comrades were doing oxen’s work in moving with cords the great blocks of the fresh stone that was being fitted into the Pelasgic wall.

As for the Sicilian, the red sunset skies and the shallow waters of the lagoon seemed to circle round him : he felt as if the high black rocks of Argentaro had fallen upon him.

The men of Sicily in general do not think a brigand a criminal ; the calling to them seems a fair and a brave one. To take to the hills is, in their sight, natural enough, and honourable, since it needs a sure eye, a firm hand, a steady foot, and a bold spirit. But Daniello Villamagna came of an old seafaring stock, who had been always most

loyal and honest mariners. He and his did not look with the common Sicilian sympathy on the *malandrini*. They did not abhor their crimes, indeed, as northern nations or people of the cities might do. They believed a man might be a mountain-robber, yet have Heaven's grace touch him all the same. Still, no one of them had ever had dealings with or friendship for the brigands that undermine public security all over Sicily, as the *scolytus* will do the trunk of a beech-tree; and to him Saturnino of Santa Fiora was a sinner who merited his chains

That this great brute, with the dark hair on his naked breast like a wild beast, and his cavernous, cruel eyes that glowed like a wild beast's in the dark, should claim her, his Musoncella—his scarcely-known, tenderly-adored, proud, self-willed, silent, haughty daughter of the moors and sea—seemed to him so incredible that he leaned there against the broken wall staring straight before him, and wondering if he were awake; and, if awake, were in his senses.

The deeds of Saturnino were not of his generation, but he had heard tell of

them ; they had reached even to his own Sicilian shores, where the Sicilian mountain chiefs had been jealous of the Achilles-like valour, and the countless and ghastly acts, which had marked the blood-stained rule of the Maremmano hero.

He knew that Saturnino had made no more count of the life of a man than a fisher of those shores made of the life of a fish. His blood ran cold as he stood there in the glow from the carmine-colour of the west. He tried by every method he could to approach and speak again to the galley-slave, but in vain. Saturnino was kept at work amidst others, close under the eye of the overseer. Vigilance was redoubled as the shadows of evening drew near and the lamps were lit on the mole.

The men worked there till ten at night, and then were called off to their prisons, while the sea grew alive with the boats for the spearing, and a myriad of little golden lights sparkled on the water as the fire-flies do on the land, and the whole seafaring population of the coast, from ten miles up and down, strained, and leaped, and cursed, and laughed, and wrangled, and shouted as the shoal of fish was murdered.

All the uproar, and the mirth, and the quarrels, and the triumphs failed to divert the young skipper from his thoughts. He pulled out alone to his good brig, and spent the night on his own deck, astonished and perplexed.

With morning he tried again to get an instant's speech with Saturnino.

In vain he spent his day by the sea-wall watching the labours of the gang. It was sunset again before he could seize a moment when the overseer was occupied, and Mastarna had been allowed to pause in his ox-like toil. Then he said quickly, in a whisper :

‘Are you truly her father?’

‘She has the face of the woman I loved most ; she has the face of Serapia,’ answered the galley-slave. ‘When I was taken first I gave her to a woman of Santa Tarsilla. I see she knows nought of me. Last year she saved and sheltered me ; but then I scarce looked at her. I was half-drowned, and mad with hunger. I took the gold toys out of the place she hid me in. I would rather she should never know——’

‘Why do you tell me, then?’

‘Because, by your eyes as you walked

beside her, I saw that you loved her ; and for her sake, perhaps, you will free me.'

'Free you!'

Daniello stared at him in amaze, forgetting how absolutely the one single longing to escape filled all the thoughts, and ate up all the soul, of this mountain-eagle, who was caged by the hot sea-shore.

The heart of Saturnino had thrilled with a sudden memory of tenderness as he had seen the girl in whom he had recognised Serapia's daughter ; but far stronger and more absorbing in him was his own thirst for deliverance. It was almost the only instinct left in him, and the few weeks that he had been free on his own hills in the summer before—all wretched, hungry, filled with fear, and compelled to concealment, though they were—had been so sweet to him, that night and day since he had been captured afresh he had meditated escape ; schemed for it, lived for it, scarcely felt the heat of the sun or the cold of the wind, the aching of his old wounds or the lash of the overseer's whip, for thinking every moment—could he get away ?

He would have torn himself from his trap as the eagle does, leaving its foot

wrenched off behind it. The thirst for the liberty of the hills was like a madness on him.

To his gaolers and his companions in misery he never spoke. If he could have slain them all and so escaped, he would have done it.

‘She is beautiful and her mother was noble,’ he muttered. ‘The woman who took her was a good woman. There was love in your eyes as you looked at her ; one gives the world for that—I have not forgotten. Will you help me to get free for her sake?’

‘You would torment her——’

‘No ; I might have called to the gaolers yesterday, and if I had said to them “yonder child is of my blood,” they would have let me speak to her. But I would not. I stole her gold toys ; I would rather she should never know——You are a sailor, you have a ship ; if you can get me away, take me to Sardinia. There are Mastarna men there ; kindred of mine. They, too, live by the mountains ; they would make me welcome——’

The overseer turned and resumed his walk near them.

Saturnino lapsed into the sullen silence he had preserved since his capture.

‘I will see you again,’ murmured the Sicilian, and for prudence sake he left the sea-wall and went towards the town to summon those of his sailors who were drinking and domino-playing at the wine-houses.

To do what the galley-slave asked him might be utter ruin and disgrace to him ; it might cost him his vessel, and his liberty, and his good name. If he helped the captive to cheat the law, the law would most likely find out his complicity and fling him in turn into its prisons ; and he knew well that Saturnino Mastarna had been a murderer, not once, but many times ; that his crimes against the law were dark and numberless, that he was still a wild beast ready to tear even the hand that aided him.

Yet it hurt him to leave the man there in his hourly torment, in his hopeless misery, and who could tell, if he were left thus, growing more and more brutish and desperate every day, how he might not in sheer despair call upon his daughter to drink his cup of bitterness with him ? Or if he escaped by himself, might he not seek her out and compel her to shelter him

afresh, and bury her youth for ever underneath the weight of his own secrecy and guilt? If it were possible to rescue him, would it not be well done for her sake?

He was generous, and he took little thought, and the memory of Musa was with him, potent and intoxicating as the fumes of strong wine; her coldness, her scorn, her strength enhanced her beauty of person to him. The dangerous race she sprang from gave her a mystery and a magic the more. To the northern mind and worldly knowledge of Sanctis this lineage had seemed the most terrible of all inheritance. But to the Sicilian it made her look the lovelier; as Persephone looked to her lover when the darkness of the shades was about her instead of the flowering fields.

That in her veins ran the bold, fierce blood of the Mastarna of the Apennine rocks was but a reason the more for him to long to bear her away on the deck of his own good brig, and dwell with her under the dark green orange-groves beside his own blue sea, and make her the happy mother of dauntless children who would ride the waves like the dolphin and nautilus.



CHAPTER XXVII.

HSTE'S had been the usual tranquil, amorous, unoccupied life of young Italian men in old Italian cities that are away from the common track of travel : a life of sleepy calm, of often harmless dalliance, that usually has its story told from birth to death within the circle of the old town walls. Why not? Men used to be greater when they lived only on one spot, and more content. Unhappily, now, the greatness and the content are gone, because that which used to be repose too often is now but apathy, languor, rust.

He had studied under monks in an ecclesiastical college, ancient and solemn in art and architecture, where no boy laughed

above his breath, and a Greek chorus was second to a Latin hymn. There he had grown up a beautiful, graceful, pensive lad, in a home straitened by penury and made austere by devotion, but keeping something of the stateliness of grander times.

To drop slowly down the wide lagoons and thread the mazes of the reed-thickets was his chief, often his only, occupation ; to make his mandoline throb a love-lay under some old sculptured casement, where some fancy of the hour was hiding behind a curtain of frayed velvet or tattered tapestry, was his sole diversion. There was enough to live on ; that slender pittance that kept his father and himself in a corner of the dark old palace would be enough for him to live on afterwards. No one spoke to him of action or of ambition ; they were unknown words in Mantua ; he lived through his years as idly and as thoughtlessly as any one of the dragon-flies above the rushes lived out their summer hour. If he were pensive and serious, it was only because the spirit of the place was on him and the sense of narrow fortunes curbed his youth.

Then, when he was twenty-four, this passion for an old man's young wife came

on him with force and sorcery, and changed the whole tenor of his dreaming, sleepy days. He lived thenceforward only for one woman, in all the beguiling mystery of a secret and mutual love.

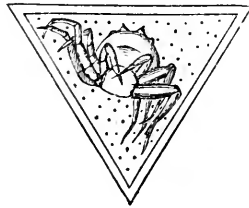
What he saw now was the beauty of that dead mistress. There is no coldness so unchanging, so unyielding, so absolute, as the coldness of one who loves what is lost. Actually, he never saw Musa with any eyes that realised her beauty or her girlhood.

He saw some one who was good to him in his sickness and extremity ; that was all. The woman slain in Mantua, with the cruel hole in her breast and the datura lilies red with her blood, was for ever between him and this creature who tended him, fed him, sheltered him, saved him.

He had passed through one of those terrible hours in life which even in the most sensual temperaments burn out for the moment all fires of sense and quench desire in horror. He loved with all his force the woman murdered in Mantua ; and yet he knew she was dead, dead, dead—a putrid thing pushed away under the friable, watery soil. The terror of that, the ghastliness of

it, the despair of it, froze the blood in his veins. What was this girl to him?

No more than the empty lamps of the tomb whose lights had been out two thousand years.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

NAUSICAA, in the safe shelter of her father's halls, had never tended Odysseus with more serenity and purity than the daughter of Saturnino tended his fellow-slave.

The sanctity of the tombs lay on them, the dead were so near ; neither profanity or passion seemed to have any place here in this mysterious twilight alive with the memories of a vanished people. Her innocence was a grand and noble thing, like any one of the large white lilies that rose up from the noxious mud of the marshes : a cup of ivory wet with the dewdrops of dawn, blossoming fair on fetid waters. And in him the languor of sickness and of despair

borrowed unconsciously for awhile the liveries of chastity; and he spoke no word, he made no gesture, that would have scared from its virginal calm the soul of this lonely creature, who succoured him with so much courage and so much compassion that they awed him with the sense of an eternal, infinite, and overwhelming obligation.

It needs a great nature to bear the weight of a great gratitude.

To a great nature it gives wings that bear it up to heaven; a lower nature feels it always as a clog that impatiently is dragged only so long as force compels.

Which nature was Este's he would not have known himself.

At times, indeed, the weight of his debt to the fellow-creature who had sheltered him came upon him with a shock, and startled him at its vastness. But commonly he thought no more of it than the cuckoo thinks of debt to the tree-sparrow in whose nest he lies so safely whilst April storms shake off the April blossoms.

All she did for him was done so simply, so wholly as a matter of course, that no mute claim on her part, even of look or gesture, ever recalled to him that she owed

him no more duty than she owed to any hill-fox or wounded scops who should have hidden itself in her retreat.

Sometimes he liked to talk to her ; it took him in a measure out of himself to tell her those facts or traditions of science or history which to her seemed like tales of magic. Sometimes he liked to hear her sing the mournful sea-songs of the people, though oftener the sound of the mandoline hurt him with an intolerable pain, recalling to him the moonlit nights in Mantua, when his lyric underneath her walls had told his love that his boat was there, casting its shadow on the reedy waters, white with the shining of the moonbeams.

But always she was no more to him than the slave had been to the Lucumo. Her strength, her courage, her directness of speech, her power of exertion, all made her seem to him rather a youth than a girl. He had loved a woman with soft, idle hands, and languid, inert limbs, no more capable of facing the hurricane or steering through the winter waves than a peacock in his pomp of purple is capable of breasting the breeze, or cleaving the breakers, with the gyps-vulture or the storm-swallow.

He had loved one who was as useless as the painted butterfly, as lovely and as idle as the lotus floating on its broad green leaves, rocked on the rippling water.

This creature, all strength, and daring, and continual effort, had for the moment, at least, no woman's charm for him as he saw her come home from her day's hard labour, bearing on her shoulders the faggot of sticks, or the sheave of bracken, and in her hand the fishing-nets, and the sickle or the hatchet. So might have looked any maiden of Tempe or of Calydon ; so might have looked Theocritus' love when the Sicilian vales were lilac with the meadow mint, and rent by autumn gales.

As these she had looked to Maurice Sanctis. But Este, though he knew the pastoral poets by heart, did not see her with those eyes. For him her humble daily cares of him obscured her beauty, as in days of old it obscured for mortals the divinity of those gods who came amidst them, and drove their ploughshares and sat beside their hearths.

If he had known of Daniello Villamagna, with his face like a Veronese portrait, and his sinewy elastic frame, and stately yet

supple movements, some pulse of anger might have quickened in him, and with it some smart of sudden appreciation.

But she never spoke of the Sicilian sailor ; some vague instinct locked her lips about him, though a little while before she had opened them so carelessly to Maurice Sanctis. So to Este she remained nothing more than a dryad of the lonely woods, who scarcely touched him with any sense of the sea in her ; a *genius alba* who ministered to his dire need and saved him from his hunters, but who came and went without receiving one impulse in him to keep her hand in his, and say to her, ‘I am beggared of love : make me once more rich.’ So nothing troubled the perilous peace in which she dwelt ; and the autumn deepened into winter, and the rainstorms deluged the earth above, and she was still innocent as Nausicaa, he was still sacred to her as Odysseus.

She did not know her own heart.

She did not know why all the ardour of the Sicilian left her hard and scornful ; why all the gentleness of Sanctis had left her cold and thankless ; and why one languid smile from Este’s eyes, one listless word from his mouth, made her grateful and full of joy.

She was drinking at that fatal fountain which Joconda once had feared that she would drink so deeply from that she would drown. But its waters were clear and harmless at her lips as yet ; she could not tell that there was poison in them and bitter after-taste.

She did not even know the name of this fount at which all pilgrims of earth drink soon or late. She tended him as she had tended the wounded dotterel from the Polar seas. She loved him as she had loved that ; but passion was still dumb and slumbering in her. Often in youth it lies and dreams like Endymion, and would never wake but for the kiss that startles sleep, and changes the dream into desire.

Once awakened, that peaceful rest, careless on the crushed cowslips, can come back no more.

So the months went on, and the days renewed themselves, each like the other ; filled to her with bodily exertion that had become delightful because no longer for her own sake alone, and to him with the dull, heavy, stupid pain that men of cultured mind feel when they are barred out from the world of other men and from the face of nature.

He told her all he knew of the Etruscan nation ; all (that all so little) which Pliny and Dionysius and Silius Italicus have told ; all the old tales that the Etruscans cherished, and he himself had read in dreamy boyish days of drowsy Mantuan summers—the old, old tales of Ulysses and his son ; of the Dioscuri, whose images were engraved on the mirror she used ; of Diomedes, snatched to the gods upon the Adrian isle, and his companions changed to birds.

He pictured to her the grand and puissant lucumonies that have perished so utterly off the face of the earth that even their records have perished ; he pictured to her the people driving their cattle and carrying their corn to the forests dedicated to Feronia, to exchange them with the Umbrians, the Latins, and the Sabines ; the white sacred cattle drawing the brazen ploughshare through the moist green soil, to trace the walls of cities to be ; the long, prosperous, ease-loving and luxurious life that was led through so many centuries within those cities' walls when raised, doomed to succumb and change and die out, little by little, when the tramp and the clang of the Legions came over the

mountains, and the greed of consul and of emperor robbed the land of her marbles of Luini, of her temple-columns, of her bronze and her gold work, of her delicate potteries, of her colossal statues.

The brother of Fabius Maximus, with his slave, disguised as shepherds of Gaul, with javelins and sickles, wending their perilous way through the darkness of the dreaded Ciminian woods, and descending to the rich plains and the stately cities to propose the admittance of that mission from Rome which was ultimately to be the curse of Etruria; the augurs tracing with their wand the lines of separation on the heavens, watching the flight of herons, of storks, of crows, to gather the secrets of the future, taking warning or counsel from the play of lightning on the heads of the spears, worshipping with blood-sacrifice Jupiter Elicius amidst the thunders of the storm; the fifty-oared armed galleys going out from the sunny crowded ports, some up the tawny Tiber, some away to Spina for the tin and amber come overland from the far Scandinavian waters, some by the Ægean coasts to the gorgeous and languid lands of the East, where the Tyrrhene mariners were welcomed as

brethren and sons; the sunlit towns now level with the dust, then strong with colossal bastions and ramparts, graceful with temples and with statues, stately with religious feasts and princely banquets; the son of Atys setting sail with his famished Lydians from Smyrna; the Tyrrhene pirates capturing Dionysos, and changed for their sin into water-spouting dolphins; the Persian faith brought with the Persian eagles to the Italiote soil; the great Etruscan confederations gathering in harmony at the temple of Voltumna; the oxen drawing the fair Carrara marbles into the port of Luna, to make the altars of the beloved orchard-god, or the likeness of the divine Cytharædus—all these things he set before her in vivid language, and as she followed his words she saw all that they portrayed; she heard the brazen bray of the Lydian trumpets, she saw the purple glow of the Lydian robes; when she went down to the edge of the sea, she thought of the Navigium of Isis, as the people had gathered for it on those very shores with their torches flaming against the daffodil light of a March morning; when she collected the broken boughs of the sea-

pinus for fuel, she thought of the tree laid low in symbol of lost Attis, and borne garlanded with flowers to the shrine of the Mighty Mother.

And when he told her that all this Etruscan and Latin life had been lived long ere the Galilean gathered his disciples from the fishers of the lake side ; and that before this yet again, in long ages ere the Italiote or the Tyrrhene had turned a sod of the soil of Maremma, all these green, wet, shining woodlands and red blossoming grasslands had been the haunt of the meridional elephant, of the armoured rhinoceros, of the terrible machairodus, of the huge hippopotamus, and, later than that, of the mammoth and the lion and the bear coming down over the Alps as the Goths did after them—then her eager imagination, starved so long, fed itself on all these wonders with entranced delight, and he who told her of them seemed to her a magician as marvellous in power as the Etruscan aruspice had seemed to the Etruscan slave.

Of all the tales what fascinated her the most were those of that prehistoric time when all the Tuscan valleys and plains had

been forest and marsh, and grass and water, and the vast quadrupeds had moved with massive measure through the woods that no axe touched, in the twilight that no hearth fires lit, in the green virgin wastes that had no sound but the tread of their mighty feet, the trumpet of their solemn voices; and man, when he did at length come amidst them, had been a small, and timid, and puny creature, glad to profit by the branches the elephants broke down, grateful to follow the course of the hippopotamus along the shores of the brimming rivers, meekly and humbly culling the fruits the great lords of the soil did not need. She wished that she had lived then to have been friends with the huge leaf-eating beasts. She sorrowed for them, driven away little by little off the soil they reigned over as man multiplied and climate changed, until at the last they perished utterly, as ages after them the Etruscan people did in turn.

He told her all these stories, that are written in fragments in ivory letters on the heart of the earth, when he was in the mood to speak in the long evenings that now approached as the winds drove the last leaves from the maple and ash, and

the dyer-oaks and the downy-oaks grew yellow.

His shallow studies were enough to seem to her ignorance a very ocean of knowledge, in whose depths were wondrous pearls.

When he spoke to her of all these unknown things, her mind, by nature eager, poetic, and aspiring, followed his with breathless attention and delight.

As she watched her round loaves bake in the warm embers, she hearkened to these stories of lands and peoples that she had never heard of; Herodotus and Pliny yielded what to her were tales of absolute truth, and her grave and brooding fancy, starved so long, spread with rapture over these new fields of thought, glad as any bird loosed from a narrow cage. They were all as real and beautiful to her as they were to the Etruscan sacrificing to his garden god in the red and gold of his autumn orchards, or to the Latin beseeching the smile of the goddess of the myrtle bough alike upon his vineyards and upon his nuptial joys.

They sat together in the chamber of the Lucumo, the oil burning in the bronze lamps, the wood fire upon the stones, while she wove the basket osiers or spun the

hempe; and it beguiled the time to him to recall the narratives that he had read in his college books, and after college in other books that his ecclesiastical masters called heretical and damnable, since they treated of geology and science.

Time was long and dull; he could hardly keep so much count of it as the Etruscans had kept of the years that they marked by nails in their temples.

The hours were all so precisely similar, so uneventful; so like was the night to the day, here, where he never saw the sun itself, but only some stray thread of it which came down through the briony and bindweed, some faint reflection of it which shone through the open doorway of the entrance-cell, that all the weeks became confused in his mind into one blurred, grey, colourless mass of time that might have been a century, so long it seemed. He used to think that he would remain here till he became like Carolus Magnus in the depths of the Unterberg, with grey beard grown downward to the stones, and the ages rolling on without awaking him.

His life seemed to him broken in his hands; like a plume of golden-rod or red

amaranth snapped off in its full flower and left to wither. To venture forth into the light and air was almost certainly to return to the galleys ; to stay on here, though life itself was kept up in him, was to die in all save the actual rotting of the body.

Musa to him was only like a brave boy who had rescued him ; he did not feel to her more than the Lucumo (once prince here) might have felt to the faithful slave whose ashes he had placed between his own bones and his dog's. She was perforce out all the day, getting him such food as she could, or such work as she could glean from the moors ; cutting the distaff canes to make them into bundles, seeking for edible roots, bringing in wood blown down in the autumn winds, or the dry brake to make a couch for herself, netting or spearing fish for his evening meal, searching for and gathering those medicinal herbs which she relied on as the chief means of making money enough to buy quinine and wine. Unless she went out he must starve, and so perforce she left him in these dark and stormy autumn days alone with his passionate regrets, his almost sullen despair.

If he could but have gone with her

and laboured beside her, he would have regained strength and tone.

The cumulus clouds hurrying in vast masses before the west wind; the often angry sea lashed by the north blasts into a smoking field of foam and mist in which the barques were lost as caravans of the desert are lost in the simoom; the beauty of the green, wet, shining earth, with pool and estuary brimming from the copious rains, and thronged with the flocks of arctic birds; the glory of shadow and colour, and sunbeams glowing through the steam of rain, and dark hillsides swept by the mists and echoing back the thunder,—all these, which to her were so beautiful, might have taken some hold also upon his mind and freed him from the brooding dread and desire which consumed him like a disease of vital parts.

But the outer air could never touch him save at rare short times when, fearfully, he stole to the entrance and looked up at the brambles and branches crossing one another, and envied the brown wings of the pilgrim-falcon wheeling against the wind, the silver-grey triangle of the storks travelling across the sky.

Air is the king of physicians; he who stands often with nothing between him and the open heavens will gain from them health both moral and physical. But he could not do this, and there was nothing to arouse him from the morbid dejection into which he fell with scarce an effort. The struggle had been too long for him, and these tombs at their best were but a naked prison.

Walls hung with storied tapestries, couches rich with old embroideries, a woman's ringed hand amongst his curls, a mellow warmth scented with the orange-flower and the carnation blooming in gardens green and old, love murmurs, low laughter, pensive fancies, 'sad only for wantonness,'—these were what suited him, as they suit the soft Italian night.

She was, meanwhile, still always troubled more or less by what is called a vulgar care; she found it difficult to get such food as this man, still weak and weary, could be induced to eat. The bread she made from her summer-garnered store of wild oats was hard and indifferent; there was no longer Zefferino to bring any change of diet in ewes' milk or maize flour for polenta; the crust with spring water and wild berries,

which had been enough for her strong health and unpampered appetite, were nothing to tempt the nausea and the languor of a still feeble convalescent. She knew how to do what Joconda had done. If she had had them, she could have prepared the goat's ham, the curd cheese, the broth with wine in it of savoury herbs, but except the herbs she had none of the materials needful for these things; and even for sake of Este she could not bring herself to snare the birds, her dear friends, her cherished playmates, beloved by her before she had seen his face.

This life of the wild moorlands and woodlands had been all-sufficient for her in her simple needs, but the more complicated wants of a man once used to gentle life, and now worn with long languor and weakness, found it utterly barren and empty.

It was a blessing to her that it was autumn, that many a rough fruit and edible fungus could be gathered off the moors, and that the teeming sea was still so near that she could draw from it fish succulent and various. Still, food was hard to obtain, and obtained hardly by the sheer strength of her arm and sureness of her eye; and

when afar off on the sky-line she saw the great corn-wains passing black against the sun, laden with the wheat that in all time has made Maremma the granary of Rome, she looked at them with longing hungry eyes, as her father had looked from his lair upon the rich men traversing the vale below.

True, she did not know that there were such things as riches anywhere ; the life of wealth, of luxury, was invisible to her ; every one around her lived on roughly-made polenta, a sea or a fresh-water fish, a mussel, or an onion. This was all they tasted for relish or for rarity. All the opulence and ease of the world were hidden from her by the stretching sea, the solitude of the moors, the noxious and uninhabitable marsh. But she knew that there was a region where all the grain went, all the cut grass, the burned wood, the felled pines ; a fairer, happier region, which rejoiced in all that left Maremma poor, and where sickness was not in the soil, nor fever always in the sunbeams.

Those immense plains which the men from the mountains ploughed and sowed in autumn, in summer were golden oceans of grain, reaped ere midsummer was passed.

And not a bearded head of it all could she have! The rebellion that had been the passion of her father's life rose up in her—the unreasoning rebellion of those who only know that they have nothing.

Had not her honesty been natural to her as her courage, and braced by the Piedmontese woman's stern repeated lessons, it would have broken down now under her longing to serve this man, and her wondering rage at the inequalities of fate.

'These might fetch money,' Este said once to her, taking up a *fibula* of gold and a necklace of amber which had escaped the ravenous greed of Saturnino.

'They are *theirs*,' she said quickly and sternly, and took them out of his hand and laid them down reverently.

He smiled faintly.

'Oh, do not think I would rob you like Saturnino. But these things belong to you by right of discovery, and they are no good to the dead.'

She shook her head.

'That may be. But I would sooner seize some one by the throat and rifle his pockets than I would rob those who sleep and are silent.'

‘I cannot quarrel with you for that,’ said Este. ‘Theodoric was less scrupulous than you. He ordered the plunder of the graves, and the moderns followed him.’

‘Who was Theodoric?’

‘Never mind ; I like your instinct better than his greed. It is a right one. They give to the galleys a poor wretch who opens a tomb made yesterday to seek for treasure ; and the nobles and the students who plunder the Etruscans and carry their toys of death off into cabinets and glass cases are applauded. Life is very unjust ; most crimes are sanctioned in some form or another when they take grand names.’

‘I could not steal from them, even for you,’ she answered him, without noticing his subtler argument.

Even for him she would not have touched those golden *fibulae*, those golden grasshoppers, that the dead had carried with them to the earth and trusted to it as the wild partridge trusts her nest.

Even when she used the vessels of bronze and pottery, and looked at her own face in the steel mirror of the Tyndarids, she was afraid she did an irreligious thing, an ungenerous thing, since the dead could

not avenge an insult. Though these tombs had been heaped with gold, the child of Saturnino would have touched none of it.

Having nothing else of her own, she gave Este the uttermost of her strength and patience; she laboured late and early, she hunted for edible fungi, she netted fish—a cruelty she loathed—she worked hard at the rush-plaiting and the spinning to have something to take in to Telamone or Orbetello with which to purchase the wine he needed. She raked up the pine-cones, she cut the ling and broom; she carried in the dry wood she collected from under the trees; she kept the sepulchres as clean and sweet as any sea-shell with the cleanly ways that Joconda had made a second nature to her in her childhood. She worked arduously and willingly in all ways, and this very devotion to him obscured her beauty to him; sometimes he was ingrate enough to murmur angrily because she left him so much alone.

She was only his servant to him; he did not see his ministering angel in her. He did not see that glory as of a young goddess which was about her buoyant feet and her close-curved head for the eyes of Maurice Sanctis and of the Sicilian mariner.

To them she was so proud ; to him she was so humble.

When he threw her a soft word or two of thanks, she was repaid a thousandfold ; when at nightfall she sat at her spinning, and he told her old-world stories of all that Maremma has seen since the mammoth pulled down the foliage of its esculus-oaks, she was so happy that her thoughts never travelled past that glad immediate hour.

She knew nothing of her own danger.

The only fear that ever quickened her pulse was when in the hush of night she heard the call of the bittern booming over the marshes, or the loud rush of the wild duck's wings through the air, and trembled lest the sound should be the coming of armed men to break into her sanctuary.

Now and then a quiver of sharper alarm ran through them both, when she saw any figure of shepherd or hunter on the horizon, when the mounted *buttero* crashed through the thickets chasing a brood-mare or a bull-buffalo, when the shots sounded from the marshes or the estuaries, or the boar with the hounds on his flanks burst through the evergreen brakes.

But these alarms were few and far be-

tween. Maremma is wide, and the tombs of the Lucumo were fenced about with many prickly outworks of all the *ruscus* tribe, and the holy-thorn, and the box-holly, which horses could not face and that hunters had to hack with their knives. Usually the days were perfectly still, with no sound in them save such as the birds made, or the foals as they whinnied and capered, or the wild hogs as they grunted for joy over a new fall of acorns.

She saw moreover, at last, the colour of health returning to Este's face, and strength to his listless limbs; the potent medicine of the Orbetellano leech began to restore the tone and the nerve to a constitution naturally good, though never vigorous. His physical beauty grew with each week that his lost health and force came in some degree back to him. His eyes ceased to have beneath them the dark sunken circles of weakness and pain; his skin had the delicate brown of his youth in lieu of the pallor that had been like the hue of worn ivory; his limbs lost their emaciation, and regained their symmetry of proportion and ease of movement. When he stood at nightfall for a few wary moments

at the entrance of the tombs, to draw a few timid breaths of air, and the white light of the moon fell full upon his upraised face, it was beautiful as the Vatican Hermes' is, as some human faces are here still in this land of the Apollo and the Antinous.

They were both in their youth; they had each that physical beauty which is still, despite all the efforts of the soul and mind, the one sure sorcery that earth still knows. They were together in the solitudes of the marshes and forests, in the gloom under the myrtle and the heath; but they had never as yet touched each other's lips, or found their solace on each other's breast.

Of love she knew nothing, even while she loved unconsciously; and he, for awhile, still only saw the dead face of his mistress lying in the pale lamp-light under the great golden canopy of the Gonzaga's bed.

While it is winter the porphyryion sails down the willowy streams beside the sultan-hen that is to be his love, and sees her not, and stays not her passage upon the water or through the air; she does not live as yet to him. But when the breath of the spring brings the catkins from the willows, and

the violets amidst the wood-moss on the banks, then he awakes and beholds her ; and then the stream reflects but her shape for him, and the rushes are full of the melody of his love-call. It was still winter with Este—a bitter winter of discontent ; and he had no eyes for this water-bird that swam with him through the icy current of his adversity.

To break the frozen flood that imprisoned him was his only thought.

Had he been asked he would have answered that his heart was dead, like last year's violets, and his passions with it.

‘If only you could come out with me !’ she said often with a sigh to him, since to her greatest and most cruel of all losses was it to be debarred the feel of the wind as it blew, the sight of the cloud-shadows as they sailed over the moors and meadows.

‘Never more shall I see the sun and smell the heather,’ he said wearily. ‘It is hardly worth while to live on—thus.’

Yet it was not the heather and the sun that he missed the most, or would the first have sought. His heaven had not lain, like hers, in the sense of the broad sky, in the feel of the elastic grass, in the simple joys of

motion and vision and the gladness of bright weather. What he longed for were amorous secrecy, forbidden delights, the silent ways of an old city that he knew, the warm loveliness of a woman who had leaned from her casement to draw him the sooner upward to her arms.

Nature was nothing to him—to him said nothing. What he longed for with intolerable weariness was once more himself to live. At his age men cling to life tenaciously, and death appals at all ages the Latin temperament. Yet even he at times felt tempted to make an end of this dull, torpid, aimless existence, maintained at such difficulty and in such hardship: the life of a hawk, half-starved, in an iron cage. Often when she was away he looked at the keen-edged dagger, or thought of the deep pools of this wilderness, where none but the moorhens and mallards would see a human life come to its last rest amidst the reeds.

But he was young, and so against all reason hope remained with him, and made endurance possible.

It was November weather; brilliant and luminous, with noons warm as summer, and

gorgeous sunsets, and cold misty dawns that heralded bright days.

The woods were in all their pomp ; the poplars yellow as guinea-gold ; the ashes, in their wondrous mingling of fawn-colour and purple and brown and crimson, the most glorious of all autumn foliage ; the oaks resisted change sternly for awhile, and then transformed themselves suddenly into masses of amber and of bronze ; the bays were black with fruit ; the pines knobbed with ripe cones ; the maple was a glow of scarlet ; the osmunda and the hart's-tongue were like great flames of fire, on the ground.

The huge white clouds that wise men call cirri-cumuli swept grandly over the blue sky, and gathered in masses westward as the sun went down. The air was strong and full of exhilaration ; the pungent odours of the wood-smoke rolled down the mountain sides. Last of all the flowers, the pretty canary-coloured dragon's-mouth was in blossom in all green places. It was a season in which, despite the added perils that came with it, only to breathe and move seemed joy enough to Musa ; the earth and air around her were so gorgeous, so clear, so radiant, so healthful.



CHAPTER XXIX.



NE day she went out fishing as soon as the mountains grew red with the uprising of the sun.

When she came ashore the morning was still young ; the water had been very cold, the air was stormy with a west wind, far away where Sardinia lay unseen in the south, mists were hurrying up in great armies ; here the sun still shone, and the dazzle of golden light and the play of deep blue shadows cast from the wind-tossed clouds were very beautiful upon land and sea.

The Sasso Scritto was all purple and green with the flowering rosemary that covered its marble-veined sandstone ; the rock-pigeons were wheeling and meeting above it and across it, foreseeing a change in

the sunshiny weather; some kittiwakes had arrived and were floating away to the estuary; a Dutch dogger with square sail was passing in the distance, and a little fleet of feluccas, graceful as the kittiwakes, was running merrily under the west wind towards the Cape of Troja.

Musa, in haste to return, put the rope of her boat over her shoulders and began to pull it over the sand to that hole in the rocks where she was wont to hide it. As she bent her head and shoulders forward to make the first effort at hauling it from the fringe of the waves, she heard the sound of oars in the water behind her. Always afraid of being watched, and above all afraid when she had her boat, lest any should see and steal it as soon as her back was turned, she let the rope fall from her shoulders and looked towards the sea.

In another moment, another boat's keel ground upon the sand and stones, and from it Maurice Sanctis leaped, and stood before her amongst the southernwood and sea-rush. For a moment they were both mute; he from hesitation, she from fear and anger commingled. By the Sasso Scritto no human foot but her own fell on that solitary shore

from one year to another. It was a bad place for landing, and its ill-repute for this amongst the fishermen had long kept it untroubled for her and the blue-rocks and the rock-martins.

She had never dreaded disturbance there. She stood with wide-opened angry eyes staring on him, the rope slipping through her hand, the sea water running from her kilted skirt and shining feet, the west wind blowing the dusky gold of her curls, her cheeks warm with exertion and the cold sea air till they glowed like the damask of the autumn rose.

‘Why did you come back?’ she said, with a sombre wrath in her voice. ‘I told you to go away; I told you to stay away.’

‘I could not obey you,’ said Sanctis gently. ‘I have been away five months and more. I strove against the wish to return, since I knew that I should be unwelcome to you. But at last, the thought of you all alone now that winter is so nigh overcame my resolution. I could not stay on in ease and mirth and luxury in Paris and think of you in the wild weather dependent on chance for bread.’

He looked at her wistfully. She seemed

to him more lovely than before, and more than ever sternly and fiercely hostile to him.

In truth she was not thinking of him at all, except in the sense of a fresh and terrible danger. How could she keep him out of the tombs? How could she prevent his finding Este there? It was of that alone she was thinking as she continued to gaze at him, her eyes full of anger and alarm.

‘Do not look at me with so much fear and hatred,’ he said patiently. ‘I can wish you nothing but good. There is the memory of Joconda between us. Can it not be in some little measure a peace-maker?’

Her eyes softened at the name he invoked, but she was too deeply disturbed for her to be won over by his words.

‘I do not know why you should trouble yourself as to me,’ she said sullenly—sullenness that was the outcome of extreme dread. ‘I told you in the summer-time I have all I want. I am happy. But I do not like to be hunted like this. Go back to your own country, and leave me alone in mine.’

‘You are alone still?’ he asked: he was thinking of the Sicilian sailor.

Her face grew troubled and the rose of her cheeks spread over her brow and throat. She had never lied in her life. She must needs lie now. It was the shame of that which made her blush so hotly; but Sanctis only saw in the sudden flush of colour an answer to his question made in such wise that there was nothing else left to learn. Yet he could not repress an impatient word.

‘It is the Sicilian?’ he said quickly.

She laughed angrily.

‘You remember the Sicilian? No; he is gone as he came. I tell you I want no one. If I did, what would that be to you? I do not know why you torment me. I loved Joconda, but, I told you before, you have nothing of her. You are rich and she was poor; your people forgot her all her life long, and I do not see why you should think of her now. As for me, I am well and I need nothing; but do not hunt me—it makes me wicked.’

‘I do not hunt you,’ said Sanctis, distressed and perplexed. ‘Why should you think of such a thing? I would be your friend if you would let me, and I cannot understand why I should seem to you an enemy. It is impossible that I can be that.’

You are set against me, but that is no fault of mine. I have met you by mere accident. I came here to go over the moors to your sepulchre. I intended nothing but what was open and simple. I landed at Orbetello this morning——’

The colour faded as quickly out of her face as it had come there. A great dread froze her very heart. How could she keep him from the tombs? His patient gentleness with his unchanging resolve alarmed her much more than any fiery menaces or reproaches of Daniello Villamagna’s would have done. It gave her the impression of being something she could neither bend nor break. This northern persistence gave her the sense of being meshed in by it as the fish were in the web of the nets.

She did not know what to say to him, nor how to rid herself of his importunity.

‘You see I do not want for anything,’ she said at last. ‘You see I am strong and well. Go back to your own land and leave me in mine. I told you in the summer you cannot drive a grey-lag goose by force to the poultry byre.’

‘Will you not let me come with you?’

‘No ; if the people, any one of them, see

you here again they will talk of me and find out where I dwell. I told you so in the summer. You are a stranger, you are a signore; it looks odd to see you here.'

'I will come to you there——'

Her heart beat loud; a great terror which she concealed was upon her.

'It will be ungenerous if you do,' she said coldly. 'I should never have been found by you if Zirlo had not betrayed me. Do not be as mean as he. When I see where a moorhen has made her nest, I never go near; I will even walk miles out of the way sooner than disturb her. Why do you not feel that for me?'

'Is it a nest that you have made there?' said Sanctis with an irritation that he would have been ill able to explain to himself. 'You were all alone with your dead in the summer.'

'The dead are better friends than the living.'

'You escape my question.'

'I do not see why you should question me. Let me go; that is all I wish to do.'

'You are free to go, of course. But if you forbid me to follow you, will you meet me here once at the least?'

‘What can you have to say? If it be what you said in the summer, you know that it is of no use to say it all again. I shall not come.’

‘Let me put your boat up for you at the least,’ said Sanctis, controlling whatever impatience he felt and having faith that patience soon or late prevailed with all women. ‘Your shore folks must be very honest people that they have never stolen it from you.’

‘It is not because they are honest, but because they are afraid of the Sasso Scritto. It has a bad name. There are sunken rocks and quaking sands about it. I know where they are, but they are always dangerous.’

As she spoke, she drew the rope over her shoulders and began to pull her boat upward.

Seeing that she was obdurate, Sanctis went behind the boat and pushed it and lifted it through the stones and the sand and the sea-grasses that choked the way.

‘I have put it up every day that I have used it without help,’ said Musa, angrily.

But he did not desist, and with the aid

of his strength the little skiff was soon safe beyond the water-mark of the rocks in a cleft that glittered with marbles golden and white, and gleams of porphyry and agate.

Then she took out of it the little fish she had captured, and turned her head to Sanctis.

‘If really you do not hunt me, do not come with me. If you try to follow me I will run; you know I am swifter than you. I can go as fast as the bunting when I choose.’

‘Will you meet me here once for Joconda’s sake?—I will not ask you for myself.’

‘Very well,’ she said reluctantly. ‘It is folly. But I will come if nothing else will content you. I will be here to-morrow at this hour.’

‘Not this evening?’

‘No; to-morrow. Keep your word, and do not follow me. It makes me feel as the buck feels when the dogs are after him. I am very sorry that you have come from your own country, for it is loss of time, and to you I seem thankless and rude, no doubt. Look up yonder at those rock-martins. What is the best thing you can do for them?’

It is to leave them alone. I am like them ; I have my house in the rocks. I do not want to go away to other air as the night-ingales go and the lorys.'

'But in those sepulchres, under the earth——'

'The kingfisher's house is under the earth, and he would not thank you to pull him out of it. I will come here to-morrow — for Joconda's sake. Farewell to-day.'

With the little glittering fish in her hand, and the sea-wet wool of her clothes clinging to her limbs, she turned away and began to climb the face of the cliff as rapidly and as easily as a woodpecker climbs a tree.

She went so quickly and with such sure feet that the bluish-grey of her kirtle was soon lost amongst the blue and green of the rosemary. The sun-rays and the shadows played about her head, and the rock-doves who knew her so well flew in circles round her path ; soon she had climbed to where the little rain clouds floated across the upper portion of the cliff, and there the vapour of them took her to itself as if she were indeed the goddess of the golden bow and hidden in a cloud.

Sanctis stood baffled and troubled, looking up at the face of the cliff and watching the blue-rocks whirling under the shadows and the martins swaying under the force of the wind as they flew. He could not tell what to think. An irresistible desire to try once more to persuade her, to see once more this sad sunlit land she loved, had driven him here on an impulse altogether against his judgment. A vague jealousy stirred in him, thinking of that hot blush that had come upon her face. Had any found the mystical secret of influence that escaped himself? Had any more akin to her learned the way to tame and move her? It did not seem possible; she was still so bold, so dauntless, so grave, so innocent. Surely Love had not passed by there?

His heart set itself on winning this halcyon from its subterranean home; on bringing this flame-winged flamingo from the loneliness of the marsh and the estuary into the world of men.

It was no wise wish, nor was it one easy of fulfilment, but in its very un wisdom and difficulty it dominated him with the same persistence of possession as that with which the desire of her beauty haunted the Silician

mariner. He did not try to follow her ; she had touched his pride when she had called the attempt ungenerous. But he stood motionless, and followed her in thought over the head of the cliff and along that green winter country which stretched between the shore and the tomb of the Lucumo.

Sudden splashes of white rain and the breaking of the clouds massed southward into storm aroused him. Under the heavy downpour from the skies and against the wind he made his tedious way back to desolate Telamone.

Musa ran home as fast as the little felucca fleet was scudding before the wind to the Trojan cape. Este was looking impatiently upward through the shrubs that screened the entrance.

‘How long you have been,’ he said, with a little accent of reproach that was almost querulous.

‘I will make haste now,’ she said humbly, and, without waiting to change her skirt, still heavy with sea and rain water, she began at once to light a charcoal fire in the bronze vessel which served her for that purpose.

‘I wish you had not to be so constantly away,’ said Este, as he watched her at her

work. 'It is very lonely here. There is not even a dog.'

'What can I do?' she answered him. 'You must have food, so must I. It does not grow on these rocks.'

'I know, I know! And I am so useless!'

She was silent as she fanned the charcoal with her breath. She was wondering whether she had better tell him of the new danger to him that might arise if Maurice Sanctis should come thither.

But silence was so habitual with her that she doubted the wisdom of any departure from it. Of what use to torment him with a new dread? She trusted to her own powers of repelling her undesired friend in so resolute a manner that Sanctis would abandon his attempts to force his companionship and assistance on her. She knew that he would not come there all that day; amidst her suspicion of him as so unlike anything she had ever known, her instinct made her unconsciously do justice to the loyalty of his nature.

'What is a place they call Paris?' she said suddenly to Este, as she watched his fish roast in the heat from the charcoal.

‘It is a great French city,’ Este answered her. ‘I was never there. It is all light and noise and mirth, they say ; it is carnival with them all the year round. They are very great in comedy and spectacle ; they are half Greek and half Harlequin. What made you think of Paris ? I would sooner you saw Mantua, with its water-meadows and its long lines of reeds, and its dying frescoes, and all the ghosts of the Gonzaga. What could make you think of Paris ? The sea-gulls could not talk to you of it.’

‘I met a stranger on the shore ; he said he was of Paris.’

‘A stranger ? A young man ?’

‘He is not old.’

‘Have you seen him before ?’

‘Yes—in the summer ; before you came here. Then he went away, and now he is here again ; and you will be very careful, because in the summer he made paintings of these tombs, and it may be that he will come back to do the same.’

Then she took the fish from the embers, and served them with a tempting grace upon some green leaves on one of the red and black dishes of the Etruscan ware. She took none of them herself ; she ate her

rough oaten bread with good appetite, whilst she gave a roll of wheaten flour to Este and a draught of wine in the ivory *skyphos*.

‘I thought you always hid yourself from all eyes,’ said Este with some anger, as he looked suddenly at her. ‘You must have stayed to converse with this man since you know whence he came.’

‘I had talked to him in the summer-time. He means no harm ; only he must not see you, though I do not think he would speak and tell of you ; do not come so near the entrance as you were to-day.’

Este was silent. A new sense stirred in him that was almost a jealous anger. When she was away all through the long hours he had never thought of her as seeing or being seen by any human creature ; he knew she hid herself from the shepherd, from the hunter, from the cattle-keeper, from the charcoal-burner, and he had thought these were the only men that ever passed over the moors or came down to the marshes, and that these were scattered and met with but rarely. All in a moment, as he heard her speak of meeting a stranger on the shore, he became suddenly alive to that great personal

beauty in her which his mind had languidly acknowledged but his pulse had never quickened to before.

This stranger had been here in the summer and had come again !

All at once he realised that here, growing unnoticed by him in the twilight in the heart of the rocks, was a wild flower that men of science would envy him ; an orchid of the swamps, an amaryllis of the woods, that they would covet for hothouse and hortus siccus in the cities of the world.

‘Why do you go out so long and so often?’ he said angrily. ‘You are too young, you are too handsome ; you cannot wander as the hare does and the polecat from morn to eve.’

She laughed a little.

‘I must, or what food should we have ? The danger is not for me ; it is for you. If any one come down into these tombs you must hide yourself, and you are not careful enough when I am away.’

‘Stay, then. Do not go. We can live on bread.’

‘I can. You cannot.’

‘I would sooner die of hunger than that you should meet with other men and talk

with them, and let them see the glory of your eyes.'

He spoke rather with petulance than with passion. Musa coloured a little.

'I did not suppose you cared,' she said, and then was silent, not understanding entirely why he was displeased and why his displeasure gave her joy.

'Of course I care! You are all I have!' he said impetuously, and then paused. He was not sure that he did care; only he was sure that he did not choose for men from the North to meet her on the shore and tell her stories of Paris.

Musa put down some of her bread uneaten, and rose and went towards the stone chamber where Joconda's coffin was, and where he would no more have dared to enter than he would have dared to draw a knife across her throat as Saturnino once had bidden him do if she were troublesome or squeamish.

'I must change my clothes,' she said to him as she moved away. 'It rained very hard as I came back; and the rain gives ague, they say, though never yet has it hurt me.'

'Stay! have my words frightened you?'

‘No. Why should they?’

‘Then you care nothing for me!’

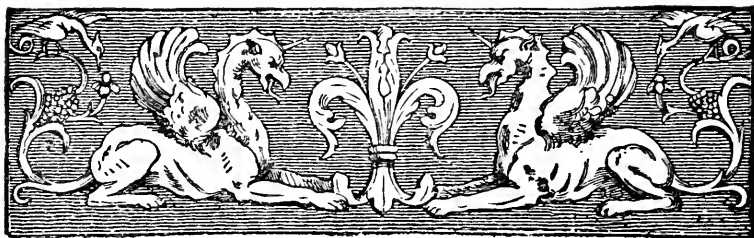
‘I think you talk idly.’

She spoke gravely, with the shadow of some reproach for the first time upon her face.

‘Oh, you care—as saints care for sinners, as wood nymphs cared for mortals! What is that?’

She might have said to him ‘it is your life at least;’ but she answered nothing. She took her hand from the hold of his fingers, and alike without haste and without hesitation passed into the chamber where the dead body of Joconda still gave her its defence, as the sense of holiness in a consecrated place protects the jewels and the silver of an altar from bold hands and covetous eyes.





CHAPTER XXX.

ALL that day they spoke little to each other. At daybreak she rose to keep her tryst by the Sasso Scritto. When she crossed the entrance-place Este stood before the stairs.

‘You go to meet that northern stranger?’ he asked.

She looked him straight in the eyes. ‘Yes; if I do not go, he will come here.’

‘Let him come. You shall not stir from here.’

For a moment her eyes flashed fire. ‘You could not prevent me if I put out my strength,’ she said quietly. ‘I promised to see him there to prevent him from coming here. If I do not go, I tell you he will

come; he will feel that I have not kept faith with him.'

'I wish that he should feel that. If you do so, I will go over to Orbetello and give myself up to the law.'

'That is madness.'

'I swear that I will surrender myself if you meet this man.'

He spoke now with both a petulance and a passion that carried truth with them. For the moment he meant what he said; for the moment nothing on earth seemed of any import to him except to keep her there.

She grew pale, and her dauntless temper did not rise in revolt.

'You will make me break my word!' she said, with a wistfulness of appeal in her voice.

'Yes; I will make you break it, or I will keep mine and give myself to the galleys.'

'I will not go,' she said with a humility of obedience utterly alien to her nature. 'I will not go. But it is folly; and I am afraid that harm will come of it.'

'Let come what will,' said Este, with a

glow of triumph on the pale olive of his cheeks.

He said no more to her, nor she to him.

She occupied herself in the common cares of that cleanliness and order which Joconda had taught her, and with which she kept her strange dwelling-place as heedfully as though it were a palace. She made her bread; she drew fresh water; she prepared a meal of mushrooms and herb broth; then she took her spinning-wheel and sat at it without lifting her eyes from the distaff.

Without, the rain was still falling heavily; the wind was high. There was no sound on the moors except the rushing of swollen rivulets and the sough of the bay and the arbutus boughs blowing and rustling together; the woodland animals were in their forms, their lairs, their earths; the birds were all tucked away under the leafless willows or the thick ilex-oak foliage. The only creatures that rejoiced were the marsh frogs and the mallards.

The rain fell all the day.

She spun on and on; he wove the osiers, as he had learned to do to wile away the tedium of the long uncounted hours. Ever

and again he watched her with eyes that saw her as though they rested on her for the first time.

It seemed to him that he had been blind. He saw her now as Sanctis saw her ;—a creature half divine from strength and innocence united, and with all the fragrance of the woods and all the freshness of the dawn and of the dew about her, and with the mystery of the forest night and the silence of sleeping nature part of her as they were of the nymphs, on whom no mortal looked without madness befalling him, or death.

Disease and weakness and the carking pain of continual apprehension had kept him dull, sightless, half dead ; now he was roused and saw, and his dead love drifted away from him and went to join the many ghosts that walk at midnight down the dim ways of Mantua, once the Glorious.

Yet still he knew that he had loved his lady there, as he would not have strength or faith in him ever to love again.



CHAPTER XXXI.

ON the shore, in the wild, wet morning, Maurice Sanctis waited for her in vain.

He was too hardy a mountaineer by birth to heed rainy weather; he sat or stood beside her boat in the cleft in the rocks, and patiently counted the hours as they went by. There was nothing to be seen on sea or land; the one was all mist and wind, the other was obscured by the driving sheets of rain. When noon had gone, he gave up all hope of seeing her that day; he knew she did not fear bad weather, yet he thought it was possible the ink-black skies might have deterred her from coming so far as the Sasso Scritto. 'She will be here to-morrow,' he said to himself, and went back to the wretchedness of Telamone.

‘I am a fool,’ he said to himself, but the folly grew with him. He had set his heart on saving her from this wild and solitary life, which was endurable only as long as youth and health should last, but even then was hourly filled with a thousand sources of peril and possible evil.

He grew uneasy. It was unlike her nature to fail in what she had promised ; she was too grave to be capricious, too tenacious to be deterred by any obstacle or accident from doing what she had said she would do. He saw she had not come there in his absence, for she had not used the little boat, which remained always high and dry upon the shelf of rock, the oars and the fishing-gear lying inside it. For her to be so many days away from the sea, he felt that something unforeseen and serious must have occurred.

Any day, a wild boar might turn on her ; a false step take her from the narrow path of safety into the slimy slow death of the black bog ; the fever that she never feared might yet overtake her, or the lawless fierce men from the mountains find out her dwelling-place under the marucca and myrtle. The soil of Maremma was

treacherous as Iago, and, though she made no count of it, her days were full of danger as the timid snipe's for whom the fox waits in the brushwood, and the muzzle of the gun slips through the reeds, and the hawk watches above in the air, and the dog steals through the fennel and brankursine. She in her courage and ignorance hardly ever thought of these perils, and trusted to the earth and to the water as a child to its progenitors. But Sanctis, who had thought of them almost unceasingly ever since he had first seen her face, was tormented now by his own imagination.

The people of the coast wondered to see him there, but they supposed he was one of those foreigners who to them seemed half-witted, who endured privations, and penetrated trackless swamps, and asked innumerable questions, in the effort to find buried stones and marbles under the vegetation of Maremma.

He spent money willingly and gave no trouble, and understood their boating and their fishing; he had not been unwelcome to them in the summer-time, and he paid largely for the little vessel that he hired and sailed himself.

He went to the Sasso Scritto on three fine mornings when the weather had cleared into the buoyant and transparent brilliancy usual in winter ; but Musa did not come.

He thought of going on to Orbetello and there obtaining permission of the authorities to see the man who had once been the terror of all travellers and the idol of all Maremma.

He was curious to know and study something of that wild nature whose love of liberty and impatience of control and custom were inherited by her. He took blame to himself that he had not done so in the summer, that he had allowed her intolerance towards him to drive him so soon away from her shores.

He promised himself that with the morrow he would repair his fault. But when that day he reached Telamone, the people of the little town were talking of an event that had happened that night in Orbetello.

Listening to their chatter on the beach, where the aloes pricked through the sand, he heard that Saturnino of Santa Fiora, as the people still called him, had escaped a second time. As they had worked at night

on the sea-wall, he had leaped at one bound into the waves, as he had done off the island of Gorgona. The night had been dark from heavy clouds; in the fitful light from the lamps and lanterns he had been lost to sight; though bullets had ploughed the waters and boats been sent out in all directions he had never been seen again. Sharks were about, and it was guessed that he had met his fate in their jaws.

It was said that one of the gaolers, who was a native of the Monte Labbro country, had favoured the prisoner by intentional lack of vigilance; but no one suspected of any complicity with him the skipper of the Sicilian brig that had been beating about up and down the coast for some weeks, waiting for a south-easterly wind to bear her back merrily to Messina—a wind which rose that night.

The few folks of Telamone, loitering out there amongst the aloes and the sand and the loose stones, once more recalled the long-passed time when Saturnino Mastarna had been the hero of every tale that was told on tartana-decks in a calm, or on land in the hot windless weather.

Sanctis listened to their rambling dis-

jointed talk, and gathered the facts out of the loose, redundant words, and a light of comprehension broke in upon him; Saturnino was at large once more, he felt sure that it was in the tombs that he was sheltered. He did not for a moment believe that either the sharks or the sea had killed him; he made no doubt for an instant that her father's presence was her secret, and his danger her anxiety. He grew angry against himself for ever having suspected otherwise; for ever having attributed to that fearless life of hers the passions and the weakness of an amorous secrecy. His heart grew lighter; and he felt that he could not leave her land.

He waited patiently a whole week, willing to have her come of her own accord, if it were possible, rather than rouse her susceptible apprehensions of him as of one who haunted her.

With all the pleasures and successes of the cultured world ready to his hand, he, whose every hour could be rich in creation and ambition, stayed on by choice in the squalor and poverty of a sickly fishing village: his days empty, his mind barren, his art neglected, and the world forgotten.

He spent all his time under the great wall of the Sasso Scritto, while the surf leaped up amongst the rosemary and the waves ran in between the now leafless rock-rose bushes.

Great ships passed in the offing, their canvas swelling in the wind; yawls and brigs and the tartane of the coast went to and fro in the fresh weather, dipping and showing their copper under the rolling of the seas; now and then a little felucca with her single sail stood off the shore while her men were fishing, or out from the bay of Follonica a whole lateen fleet came crowding when the news was told of a shoal of *ragni* or *rombi* seen at sunrise. He waited patiently, with the sea and its vessels before his eyes, and the big white clouds floating above the head of the bluff.

But not a soul came there.

Even his patience, which was long, began to give way under the stress of time.

He might wait for ever on this shore. He began to think that he was under the sway of Circe, and that these fables after all were not so far from truth.

Then his fears took a more prosaic path,

and he began to be alarmed lest any accident of asp-bite, or marsh-miasma, or too rash trust to the chill waters of the pools and streams should have befallen this child of Glaucus that she came not to the sea, to which he knew her face turned ever so faithfully, as the face of the sunflower to the west at evening.

At last, on the morning of the eighth day, he climbed the cliffs and began to walk across the evergreen water-threaded land above, where the little slender pipes of the robins were sounding under the berry-laden boughs of the bay.

Wild as the country was, and dangerous with bog that moss and couch grass hid from sight, he remembered by certain landmarks of tree and tufa-mound and the look of the distant mountains how to find his way back to the tomb of the Lucumo.

‘She cannot blame me if I go there now, he thought; ‘she has failed me.’

His heart burned within him with as much anger and alarm as ever she had felt at his presence. His natural calmness forsook him. He had come in good faith for good offices and he had been met with indignity.

There was not a disloyal thought in him,

and she dealt with him as if he were the hunter and snarer she had called him.

‘She shall do me justice ere I go, if I must leave her to her fate,’ he thought as he walked on over the soaked turf and cut his way through the *pungente* and the prickly pettygree.

His step flushed woodcocks, the partridge flew before him up from her tuft of rosemary, the coots fluttered and splashed as he passed their pools, a pilgrim falcon sailed by holding a rat in its talons. He was a mountaineer, a hunter on his own alps, but he never noticed these creatures now. Even, artist though he was, the beauty of the scarlet balls hanging amongst the glossy leaves of the arbutus, of the red earth glowing under the morning sun, of the brimming streamlets coursing through the grass, of the flocks of white northern divers settled on the estuaries, of the azure and emerald wings of the kingfisher and the porphyryion flashing amidst the grey network of leafless willows, even these, and all the untellable wonder of colour woven there in the shadow and the sunshine as on a web of green and gold, of scarlet and purple, escaped his sight that day.

All he saw were sombre eyes, the colour of summer skies at midnight, looking at him with mistrust and disdain ; was a mouth, red as the red arbutus-fruit, saying to him : ‘ though you ask me for ever, never will I come.’

The way seemed long to him, and his progress slow. Though Musa ran from there to the shore almost as quickly as the fox could do, it was because she knew her way at its shortest, and sprang over the bogs by a leap from tussock to tussock, and over the streams by shallow places that she and the fox alone had found. To him the path was tedious and entangled, and it was past noonday when he at last saw the blasted suber-oak which marked the place of the tombs.

Whilst it was still some distance from him he saw Musa herself coming across the moor. She had been gathering mushrooms and collecting wood ; she had a bundle of dry boughs poised on her head. She walked easily and erect under the burden of it ; some amber leaves which were still on the branches hung down and touched her shoulder.

There was nothing in her of the toil that

is sorrow and poverty ; of toil as Millet has painted it and modern eyes seen it. Hers was the old, glad, rural, health-giving, open-air labour of the Italiote *pastorella*, of the Greek girl treading, with feet winged by youth, the honey-scented herbs and the wild ivy of Mount Ida.

The world has lost the secret of making labour a joy ; but Nature has given it to a few. Where the maidens dance the *saltarello* under the deep Sardinian forests, and the honey and the grapes are gathered beneath the snowy sides of Etna, and the oxen walk up to their loins in flowing grass where the long aisles of pines grow down the Adrian shore, this wood-magic is known still of the old, sweet, simple charm of the pastoral life.

Some wistful thought of the sort crossed the mind of Sanctis as he saw her approach. After all, what was it he wanted to force on her? Constraint for freedom, formality for fawn-like ease, the breath of crowds for the flower-fragrance of the fields, the midnight oil of anxious study or of feverish pleasure for the gracious night of a slumbering earth fresh with dews, unvexed with noise, stirred only at dawn by whisperings of birds.

For a moment all he had to offer looked poor and trivial. She had found the charm that escaped the hands of men when they slew Pan, and drowned his cries in whirr of wheels and scream of steam.

The courage of Maurice Sanctis went out of him as she drew nigh, the golden leaves touching her lightly-breathing breast. Plato's self could have found no plea to urge the hamadryad to leave her groves, the naiad to forsake her fountain.

At first she had not seen him, for there was a screen of carob boughs and withered bracken between himself and her. When she did perceive that he was there, a great and, it appeared to him, utterly inconsistent and disproportionate trouble and anger came together into her speaking eyes.

She stopped short; she did not speak.

He approached her, and said, with his usual gentleness :

‘I was afraid some ill had happened to you. It was not like you to break your word.’

‘I could not come,’ she said, with some hesitation. ‘I thought you would understand when you did not see me, and that you would go away.’

‘I asked you to hear me once, for Joconda’s sake.’

‘I could not come,’ she repeated, impatiently; ‘and I do not want to hear. I told you so.’

‘I know you do not,’ he said, with regret; ‘and I can fancy that you are reluctant to leave your woodland life. It is free and has a beauty of its own; but it needs perpetual youth and a certainty of health that are not given to our poor humanity.’

‘I shall be young a long time,’ said Musa, with her grave smile; and she drew a deep breath with the conscious strength of perfect powers of life rejoicing in themselves.

‘Yes; no doubt to you it seems that you have a kingdom there that you can never lose. But it will go away from you as it goes from all; and water and wind and weather bring its loss early. Do you never think of a future?’

‘No,’ she answered curtly. A shudder went over her for a moment. What might the future bring? Could Este always be saved from his pursuers? Would the time come when all her care and thought and

vigilance and sacrifice would be unavailing to shelter him?

‘But Joconda would have bade you think,’ he urged to her. ‘She herself thought for you or she would not have written to us. I know that the life you have made for yourself, all alone as you have been, is full of courage and strength, and has much nobility of purpose and of independence in it; and I can understand that it seems more delightful to you than any other, because of your wise love of the open air and the beasts and the birds. But, dear, it is winter even here; and if sickness should overtake you your solitude would become very terrible. I want you to think a little of that. You have no friends, you have no home, you have no one to look to in any need; and there are many dangers for a creature that is as beautiful as you are when she is so near womanhood.’

He paused, not knowing well how to put his meaning into words that her pride would hear patiently or her innocence understand.

‘I have no one who has a right to say a word to me,’ said Musa, angrily. ‘If

that is what you mean, you say truly ; and you should know by that to hold your peace and not to importune me.'

'I do not wish to importune you,' said Sanctis in his turn, a little moved from his long patience ; 'but the wishes of the dead are sacred—to me at the least. A woman, now dead, wrote to her brothers on your behalf, and I am their representative. As I have their name and their fortune, so I have their duties. I should be unworthy of them if I refused to accept the last as well as the first. You are too young to know what perils you run, what a frightful future you prepare for yourself. If you will not hear me willingly, I must try what aid the law will give me. Before the law you are an outcast, and it would deprive you of independence, it would regard your dwelling-place as nothing better than the owl's hole or the fox's earth ; it would certainly compel you to accept some other asylum. If I go to the authorities of Orbetello——'

He paused in words which he was using as his last resource without fully knowing what they meant, or how far they would lead him ; for Musa, as she stood before him, suddenly changed from a listening,

angry child into a pythoness, a lioness, a very incarnation of every shape of rage that the earth has ever seen upon it. She snatched from her girdle her long two-edged knife; she cast down her brambles and branches from her head; she leaped to within an inch of him and flashed the steel before his eyes. All the savage blood of the Mastarna of Saturnia leaped up in her, like a naphtha flame from the soil.

‘Unless you swear to me that you will never breathe a word of my name or of my dwelling, I will kill you where you stand,’ she said, as her eyes flashed their sombre fires into his; and her voice was not loud, but low and deep, like the lioness’s voice of menace. Her whole frame seemed alive with rage, as a tree, lightning-struck, is alive with the electric fluid; but it was a rage that would strike as it threatened, not a rage that would die of its own violence.

So intense a surprise seized him that he for the moment could say nothing, and did not move. They gazed into each other’s faces.

‘Will you swear it?’ she said, her voice still low, but as fierce as a snake’s hissing. ‘If you will not, you shall not leave this

place alive. You are a man and strong ; but you are unarmed, and I can kill you.'

She kept her eyes fixed on him, and her hand clenched on the stiletto. She had no fear, nor any sense of sin ; all conscience and all judgment was drowned in the flood of one passionate instinct—to save Este.

For herself she would not have so spoken. But for him she was ready to do the thing she threatened. Why would this meddler come unmasked and undesired, and thrust himself before her in these green glades that were all her own? She turned on him as the boar turns on his pursuers.

He did not move. For a moment he thought of wresting the knife from her ; then he knew her strength and her tenacity ; the manhood in him recoiled from a struggle with a woman who was scarce more than a child.

'I think you would kill me if you wished to do it,' he said gently, and with the sadness that he felt. 'I am stronger than you, but you are like the lightning of the skies ; you would find your way to cut the cord of my life somehow. But I am not an utter coward, my dear ; and I cannot promise or swear you anything under a

threat. Put the point of your knife against my heart if you like, but listen to me for a moment.'

Musa gripped her stiletto the tighter, but she did not move it nearer to him.

She understood what he meant, that he could not say what she wished under a menace. All courageous instincts found their echo in her.

'You must say that you will speak of me to no living soul,' she said slowly, 'or I cannot let you go alive out of these woods. It is not that I want to hurt you, but that if you will not be silent any other way I must silence you so; that is all.'

'And you would do it,' he said, for he did not for a moment underrate the unblenching determination that was in her, nor the ferocity of the wild blood in her when once aroused. 'But hearken one moment.'

'I will not. You wish to betray me. I will have no more words.'

'Betray is a bitter thing to say. I am no traitor. I meant only that since you throw yourself away, and all your future, in a barren and a dangerous life, I should do no more than my duty if I sought the aid of the law, which would protect you in your

own despite, and to which you would in time grow grateful.'

'That is betrayal. I have told you that rather than you should live to do it——'

Her eyes were full of fire; her breath came and went through her clenched teeth; an agony of fear made her ferocious; her hand, as it closed on the handle of the stiletto, trembled with passion; all the mercilessness of Saturnino was up and alive in her.

She longed to strike down this man who menaced her secret and her treasure.

Had he not been kindred to Joconda she would have struck, without giving him a choice.

'Do not *make* me kill you!' she muttered behind her shut teeth.

He disregarded her words. He said abruptly—

'Tell me one thing; you are not alone now?'

She was silent.

'Is that why you menace me?'

'What is that to you?'

'You say always, What is it to me! Well, it is much; more than you know, or would understand if you did know. I

think you are the loveliest creature upon earth, and your ferocity does not disgust me. It becomes you; and it is natural, being what you are. I want to take you out of all your ignorance, your peril, your barbaric liberties, and make of you the noble woman that you might become. I have no other motive. I would neither wrong you nor the dead; and you are so young; but if you be not alone, if there be another'——

'It is nothing to you,' said Musa, with passion and with desperation. 'It is nothing to you what I am or what I have.'

'You are not alone any longer,' he said, with his gaze trying to penetrate hers.

'Why should you say so?'

'Because you care too little for yourself, and are too generous to wish to kill me if it were only yourself who was disturbed by my interference.'

He kept his eyes fixed on her as he spoke; what he thought was that she sheltered Saturnino. She did not change colour or give any sign of the intense agitation that was in her.

'Very well, then; think so,' she said

between her shut teeth. 'Think anything you please ; but leave me to myself.'

'I cannot promise that. I should feel a coward if I did. I cannot leave you to yourself, for you are your own worst enemy.'

She was silent ; she was thinking sternly and unflinchingly, as her father had often thought of his foes, how she was to be rid of this man who would be Este's ruin. All life had been sacred to her in the birds and the beasts around her ; but now it seemed to her that she would have no choice but to take his since he would persist and rush upon his doom. She had been frank with him and rude ; she had warned him, she had refused him, she had done all she could to turn him aside from what appeared to her his persecution of her, and he would not be persuaded. There seemed no choice for her but to turn on him as the boar was forced to turn on those who drove him from the shelter of his bed of bracken and his screen of oaks.

He had menaced her with the law, and what would the law on herself mean but the discovery, the seizure, the eternal misery of the one for whom she was giving all her own life without counting it as sacrifice ?

‘Will you let me come with you to the tombs?’ said Sanctis, with entreaty in his voice. ‘Beside Joconda’s coffin I do not think you would be at war with me like this. I could make you understand——’

‘I understand well enough. You want to give me up to the law, though I have done no ill. And I have said that you shall never do it.’

‘Will you let me go home with you one moment?’

‘No. I will never take you there again.’

‘Because you are no longer alone?’

‘You have threatened to betray me. That is reason enough.’

Her eyes never ceased to keep their lioness-like watch on him; her hand never relaxed its hold upon the stiletto. He was of Joconda’s kindred, that was the only thought that made her pause, and give him one more chance.

‘You must promise me, swear to me,’ she said passionately, ‘or you will make me kill you. I cannot let you go to bring the law you boast of as your helper. If first of all Zirlo had not betrayed me to you, you would never have had the power to betray me

again yourself. I am not unjust to you; if you are a traitor you deserve a traitor's death, and I would give it to you—yes—though I tracked you for twenty years over one-half the earth.'

He looked at her with perplexity and admiration. He had lived all his years in the midst of cultured and controlled communities where the passions were tamed and the inborn ferocity of the human animal was scarcely visible; he had been reared amongst pious and reserved people, and his manhood had been spent amidst men whose minds were steeped in light and art, and who had little of the natural brute left in them. This intensity of purpose, this readiness for fierce action if by no other means its ends could be attained, this constancy in vengeance which would wait through half a lifetime rather than forego punishment, these the qualities of an earlier time, of a simpler and freer world than his, fascinated him by their force and their absolute unlikeness to anything in his own life. The sense of impotence that she had felt before his northern calmness and tenacity now fell on him before her more spontaneous and more violent nature; he felt that he might as well have tried to

change the course of volcanic lava as endeavour to sway or alter her, or ever make her regard him as a friend.

He looked at her, and through his mind passed many images and memories to which she had so much likeness. She belonged to the soil; she was one with it; she had its fierce suns and its fierce storms in her nature. Here on this coast, where the Dea Syria had been worshipped with madness and mutilation, where Cybele had been adored with flame and sacrifice, where earlier yet Mantus and Orcus had been propitiated with the palpitating hearts of scarce dead victims, and the tempest and the hurricane had been charged with the dread messages of the gods, here she alone seemed to live, the last echo and shadow of those vanished years, of those forgotten religions, of those changed or perished races.

To him she seemed less a living soul of his own time than some young priestess of Isis, some vision in which Lydia and Latium both lived, eternally young, preserved in the secrecy of these forests, without change, whilst all the rest of earth grew old.

What could he say to her?

How could he hope to alter her?

Who could ever have wooed Pan from his thymy nest, and Glaucus from his cool sea depths? and who should win her from their woods and waters that she alone enjoyed now that Glaucus and Pan were dead?

He felt himself powerless and humbled, as the artificial world is always before the strength and the simplicity of the sylvan life that has none of its necessities.

A sigh escaped him. She was dearer to him than he knew, and he felt that he could no more hold her than he could have held the fires of Vesuvius in his hand. He knew that he could no more bind and influence her than the shepherds and the mariners of old could capture Pan and Glaucus.

‘Well,’ he said slowly at the last, ‘I will not seek to force your secrets, and I will even dare to seem a coward to you. It may be the truer courage, and perhaps one day it is as such that you will see it. I promise you that I will not seek alien aid or bring the law you abhor to my assistance. So much I will promise you, though I do not see why you should trust my word since you mistrust myself.’

‘I thought no one ever broke their

promise,' said Musa : in such good faith the woman of Savoy had reared her.

'Well ; think so. I do not ; and you may trust me. I will speak to no one of you, or of the sepulchres that shelter you. But at the same time I do not promise you to renounce all effort to change you by my own persuasion if we meet in the neutral solitudes of these moors or on the shore. I do not promise yet to go away.'

'I cannot send you away,' she said, with the dusky fire of her eyes still luminous.

'But you will not come to me?'

'No ; since I am unwelcome.'

She slipped her stiletto back into its hiding-place, and stooped and replaced the boughs and brambles on her head.

'That is enough,' she said. 'But it will be better that you should go—me you will never see.'

'You cannot prevent my seeing you abroad?'

She smiled a little at his stupidity.

'You will no more see me than you can see the dwarf-heron when he makes himself into the likeness of a dead stump and sits, all grey and brown, amongst the sedges. You do not know the wisdom of the woods.'

Before the last word had reached his ear she was away and was soon lost to sight beyond a dense wall of arbutus and mastic.

She knew the wisdom of the woods herself as well as the bittern or the great plover knows it.

Sanctis retraced his steps with a heavy heart, seeing nothing in the blue pale light of the wintry day but her face as it had been raised to his while her hand had played with the steel. He was discouraged and discomfited, and a sense of painful defeat and mortification was upon him; she had threatened his life, and he had yielded to her. He was a man of courage enough to bear to look a coward if it were needful to do so, yet it hurt him as he went away to think that no doubt, as she was going through the leafless woodlands and the green bay thicket, she was thinking of him with contempt, perhaps with laughter.

But his nature was calm and very patient. He knew that he had been unwise to use the menace of the law to her, and that her menace of the knife had been but her natural reply. He promised himself to do better, to speak more tranquilly when next he sued her; for her threat that he should

never see her had passed by his ear unheeded.

That she was not alone he believed, yet since he had heard of the second escape of Saturnino Mastarna he had felt little doubt but that her father had sought her out in the tombs and claimed her shelter by making himself known to her. He did not think her savage pride and her stern self-dependence were compatible with any other secret.

She, who to Este was gentle and soft as the cushat to her mate, by him had been always seen untamable, and shy, and fierce as any one of the dwarf-herons that she defied him to discover by the pools.

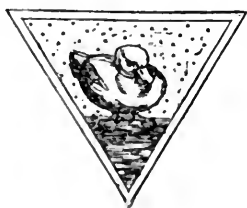
On the mountain side above San Lionardo, set well above the miasma and rain mists of the marshes, there was an old castellated place called Præstanella, half villa and half fortress, which from the ninth to the thirteenth century had been a mighty stronghold, changing hands often in the internecine wars that ravaged the Massa Maritima. Later on it had been less of a fortress, and had taken some of the characteristics of a mountain villa, having terraced gardens made before its machicolated walls and hundreds of acres of wood behind and

around it. It now belonged to a noble family who had many such places. It was neglected and half dismantled. No one cared to come to it; stewards ate in its tapestried halls and peasants made pigsties of its long vaulted corridors.

Maurice Sanctis had wandered over it in the first days that he had stayed in Maremma; the glory of its views, the intensity of its loneliness, and its war-scarred towers and weed-grown terraces pleased him. Money was nothing to him; his father Anton had left him great riches, and he had simple tastes that cost him little. He thought to himself now that he would buy this place; the price was a mere trifle, hardly more than the value of the pine-woods about its bastions. It was melancholy and had been stripped of many of its carvings, marbles, and tapestries long before, but the magnificence of its landscape and the solidity of its walls nothing but an earthquake could destroy.

That night he went to Grosseto and there saw the notary who had been charged with its sale for twenty years and more. To the rich an easy path is soon made. He was promised that in a week or two at the utter-

most the old palace in the Apennines should be made over to him with all formality and security ; a true eagle's nest set up on high, and from its heights commanding all the deep green vales and the asphodel meadows and the reedy marshes where of old Etrurian and Italiote, Roman and Goth, mercenary of Bourbon and soldier of Borgia, free lance of Florence and horseman of Massa, had turn by turn made the earth a field of death.





CHAPTER XXXII.



LITTLE later, as darkness closed in without, she and Este sat in the larger chamber of the Lucumo's bier.

It was now on the turn of the new year, and the earth was green as an emerald, though it was midwinter, with the forests of holm-oak and pine, and the dense growth of olive, of box, of bear-berry, of alaternus, of pyracantha.

The fire burned; the lamp was lighted; she sat once again at her spinning, whilst he was modelling clay that she had brought for him from the bed of the Ombrone.

He had that facile skill in the arts which is the gift, and often, also, the curse, of his countrymen, since it is too readily

skilled at imitation to be often capable of original creation. It passed the weary hours for him to mould the clay with his hands and such rude instruments as he had been able to fashion out of the bronze Etruscan *spillæ* and knives found in the tombs. He thought, too, that the time might come when she would be able to sell them for a trifle in some town; and he would thus be able to bring his quota to their maintenance.

He had modelled, in the grey river earth, flowers and fruits and oak-leaves, all forest things she brought him; the Typhon, too, and the Chimæra, and the lotus-lilies of the walls around him; but, oftenest of all, the head of Musa. Sometimes he made her with the lotus on her brow, like that Braschi Antinous she resembled; sometimes he set the sacred hawk of Egypt upon her head, as it had been set upon Cleopatra's; sometimes he took her in her own simplicity, with no wreath but her own curls, and her woollen gown, still cut like the tunics of Della Robbia's choristers, drawn close up around her slender, rounded throat; and often, as he did so, the features and the eyes of the woman murdered in Mantua would come

before him, and sometimes the bust changed despite his own will, and had a likeness in it to his dead love that he would fain have blurred out and could not; and then again, also, when the face in the clay was Musa's and hers alone, there would be, do what he could, a reproach in the eyes and a sternness in the mouth which so annoyed him that he would dash the earth out of all shape, and leave it in a heap upon the stone floor of the tomb.

To her, all these things that he did seemed marvellous and exquisite. To be able to take a lump of mud from the stream, and make it fair, in the likeness of flower or bird or human face, seemed to her a power and possession as wonderful as his knowledge of the past of perished nations. It was the first time she had been ever touched by the sorcery of the arts: the true magicians.

She would look at the likeness of herself with a grave smile; she was proud to be like that. Then she would turn her eyes away.

'Joconda always bade me think nothing of how I was made,' she said once.

Este always heard her speak of Joconda with impatience.

‘I told you the first day I saw you,’ he said to her, ‘that one could say of you what the angel Gabriel, in Boccaccio’s story, says to Madonna Lisa.’

‘I do remember,’ said Musa, with a sudden flush upon her face. ‘But that very day, when I looked in the steel mirror because you had said so, a scorpion ran across the mirror; and I believe that Joconda sent it—to remind me.’

‘You keep her memory about you like a knotted cord of penitence!’

‘No, no,’ said Musa, softly; ‘like a bit of sweet basil, that keeps away the evil eye.’

Este heard with no sympathy.

Without distinctly knowing it himself, it was just that ‘bit of sweet basil’ which he desired to pluck out of her hold; which held him aloof from her, and surrounded her with an invisible defence.

It was that sweet basil set against her breast which made her so unlike his dead love in Mantua; whose beauty had dropped to his wooing as the ripe nectarine drops at a touch off the sunny south wall.

It was but five or six o’clock; accurate time they could only keep by listening for the Ave Maria bells, morning and evening,

from the monasteries on the mountain side and the village churches down the distant shore. The stone doors of the Lucumo's chamber were shut close, but there was no lock or bar, from their inability to make either, and in the stead of those defences they relied on their quick ears and their unceasing apprehension of approach.

But in this early evening hour, as the freshly-lighted heather and pine cones crackled and blazed, and the coldness and the gloom of the wintry night closed in upon the country above them, suddenly she lifted her head and met his eyes fixed on her in angry and suspicious contemplation. She conquered her habit of silence, so long fostered by Joconda, and spoke to him.

‘Perhaps it is better you should know;—he who comes from Paris, and who wished me to meet him that other day, is a son of Joconda’s nephew, Anton Sanctis. They were poor, but he is rich.’

Then she went on to tell him in her terse and simple diction of the coming of Maurice Sanctis, through the letter of Joconda’s dictation written by the public scrivener in Grosseto.

Este heard without response, his hands all the while shaping the clay ; the lids drooped over his pensive eyes.

A confusion of anger, dismay, and jealous apprehension made him hear with disordered mind ; he kept thinking only : ‘She will go ; sooner or later, she will go.’

He had heard enough of Paris to know that it is to all women who have the chance of it an irresistible paradise and perdition ; a phosphorescent whirlpool in which all their barques swim giddily and go down, one in a thousand escaping.

For a moment he saw her in his fancy taken there, as a wild forest animal is taken to the light and noise and glitter of the circus. What would not an artist make of that beauty that was at once Greek and Lydian, at once classic and oriental, at once so vivid and so serene ? What would she be like, with jewels on her smooth transparent skin where the blood mounted so readily beneath the golden brown, with her great eyes wide opened, astonished at the world ? Would he set pearls about her throat, and take her there where all the multitudes of rich and idle life could see

her, in some great circle of some dazzling amphitheatre?

All in a moment he saw her as she would look—Penthesilea in chains of gold; the nymphæa alba of the forest waters in a hot-house; the pilgrim falcon hooded and jessed with silk for sport.

‘If he be rich, why should you not go where he asks?’ he said, without raising his eyes from their work.

The question hurt her, though in her own simplicity and integrity of purpose she saw no insult in it.

‘I would never leave Maremma,’ she said, as she had said to Sanctis.

‘Never is a word; you are a woman. Your “never” will be as long as a summer day—no longer. Maremma is accurst, your home is but a tomb; you will go.’

‘I shall not go,’ she answered, while melancholy and impatience came upon her face. Did he understand her so little? Did he so little believe?

She clung to her own old land as the fire-fly clings to its field of corn, knowing of, and wishing for, no other share of earth.

‘Is he rich—rich indeed?’ he asked again.

‘What is it to me?’ she answered. ‘He says so. He must be, no doubt, for he does no work—only makes pictures, such as they put over the altars in Santa Tarsilla and Telamone. Let us say no more of him. I only told you because I thought it best that you should know.’

‘You will think more of him,’ said Este, with sullen insistence. ‘He will tell you of Paris till you will want to go; you will learn to forget Maremma, and to forget me.’

‘You speak foolishly. Even the birds do not forget; year after year they build in the same place. Am I less worthy than they?’

‘He will talk to you till he makes you go,’ persisted Este; ‘and why should you not? You are not made to stay by me in the twilight, here, for ever. I am but a felon, and this is but a grave. Elsewhere there are worlds full of light, of sound, of stir, of colour; you will go to them and look at them with your mysterious eyes that have all the night in them—the night that means silence, and dreams, and love—and they will not understand you because you come from the depths of the forest and are not as they are; but they will adore you,

they will crown you, they will flatter you, till you will no more remember Maremma than you think now of the sand that clung to your feet yesterday as you came from the sea——’

‘I shall never go; therefore shall I never forget,’ she said simply, unmoved by the visions that were framed in his words.

She was sorry he understood so little; he seemed to her to speak foolishly and thanklessly.

‘Have I once failed him?’ she thought. ‘Have I once tired, that he thinks me so poor a thing?’

‘Why should you not go?’ he said obstinately. ‘Why should you stay?’

‘Why does the snipe stay in her reeds, and the mountain-dove cling to her rock?’

He was silent awhile. Then he rose and pushed the clay aside, and came nearer to her.

‘The snipe has her mate and the rock-dove too,’ he said with a soft murmur of his voice. ‘But you—you do not love me, though you befriend me so.’

A troubled look came into her eyes, and she left off her spinning.

‘You love the woman in Mantua,’ she

said, almost sternly; this Mantuan memory hurt her although love was in no way distinct to her, and although when she used its name she still understood little of its passion.

‘Yes,’ said Este, with a quick sigh and shudder. ‘But that past is past. She cost me dear. Her memory is only terrible——’

‘Is that love?’ said Musa, with a scornful smile upon her mouth. It seemed to her very poor.

‘It was ours,’ he answered. ‘We had a summer night; then tempest. The storm wrecked us. Oh, I loved her—yes. For months I never looked at you; do you not remember? Now that I look, now that I see, you bid me be blind.’

‘I do not understand,’ she said, troubled and confused. ‘If you loved her, that was for ever. Just because she is dead, is that a reason to change? Why should you look at me? I serve you. I do what I can; you are safe with me; that is all you want, since liberty you cannot have.’

‘No; liberty and I have said farewell. My life must pass in a prison, here or elsewhere. But you may make the prison so

fair that I shall deem it one no longer. You serve me, yes ; but do more—love me. In a way you do, I know ; but it is not that way which will content me. You are not a dog, nor a servant, like those two whose ashes lie in the entrance there. You must give me more than dogs and slaves can give, faithful and tender though they be. Oh, my dear ! love is given us to make a sunshine in this gloomy place. The mountain-doves you talk of do not dwell apart !’

He glided to her feet and sat there, and drew the distaff away from her, and gazed at her with caressing eyes that subdued her to his will and poured trouble into her heart.

‘We are happy as we are,’ she murmured. ‘Do not look so ! No ; you are not happy ; I forgot. But I thought it was always for Donna Aloysia you sorrowed——’

‘Let the dead be. We live !’ said Este with sudden passion, as his arms enclosed her and his face drooped towards her breast.

But she, with a sudden movement of alarm and anger that were rather at herself than him, thrust him away and rose with abrupt rapidity.

‘You hurt me,’ she said feverishly, and

with the first personal fear that she had ever known. 'Oh ! I have been so happy !——'

The tears rushed into her eyes. She did not know what ailed her. Some great impending loss seemed to hang over her.

'Dear, there is more happiness than that,' he murmured. 'You have known but the daybreak ; I will lead you to the noon. Are you afraid ?'

His hand stole towards her, his eyes magnetised her, his lips approached her.

For the first time she shrank from him : 'Let me go ; let me think,' she said faintly.

Neither of them heard a step come over the moist ground above and descend the steps, and pass the entrance chamber. Before either had been warned by the slightest sound, one of the rock-doors was thrust open, and through its aperture there came Maurice Sanctis.

They sprang to their feet, and the hand of each went quick as thought to the haft of a knife ; but before they could move or even think, he cried quickly :

'Wait ! I come in warning. Men from the hills, from San Lionardo, mean to visit you to-night. They have a fancy that gold

is hidden in the tomb. I overheard them ; so I came.'

He was out of breath from the haste he had made; the night dew's clung about him. His eyes, even as he spoke, were staring in blank amaze upon Este. Este himself stood erect, white to the lips with overpowering fear: but as he met the gaze of another man, the old chivalric blood that ran in his veins compelled him to conquer fear, and with dignity, even amidst his terror of discovery, and with a patrician's grace, he put Musa aside as she sprang towards the stranger, and himself advanced a step.

'I am Count Luitbrand d'Este,' he said simply. 'If you be my enemy, you can give me up; I am a runaway felon.'

There was silence between them for a moment; the grasp of his hand on her wrist held Musa motionless, and her hatred and her anguish alone spoke to the other through her eyes.

'Count Luitbrand d'Este,' said Maurice Sanctis at length, with a voice that he had hard pains to control, for his heart was beating in tumult against his ribs, 'I know nothing of you; I am not a hunter of men. I heard what I said awhile ago on the

hills; the men will come here after Ave Maria——’

‘Go out,’ said Musa to Este. ‘Hide under the shrubs till I call you; I will wait and give them welcome.’

She did not even look at Sanctis; she heard the words of warning, thinking of Este, taking their sense by instinct, but without attention to their speaker.

‘I will not leave you. Can you think me so poor a creature?’ he answered; the presence of another man stung the dulled spirit in him into life.

‘What of me!’ she cried, with agony of entreaty. ‘I will show them that there is no gold; then they will go. But if they see you——’

‘Go, both of you,’ said Sanctis, sternly. ‘Since you dwell here together, go together; I will stay and receive these men. When I have dismissed them, you can return; I too shall be gone.’

‘Why should you do this? Why should you think of us?’ said Este.

‘I do not think of you. I do not know you. I came to warn her, to save her from insult and violence, for when the men find there is no gold they will be brutal; she

will have told you of me ; I am the grandson of the brother of Joconda——’

‘You are generous,’ said Este.

There was a tone in the words that drew fire from the calm eyes of Sanctis as steel does from the flint-stone.

‘It does not matter what I am,’ he said, with effort keeping his patience. ‘What matters now is the loss of a moment. These hill-men come on a devil’s errand in hope to get man’s godhead. Let them find me here alone. They will find with me dogs that bite.’

He showed the steel of his pistols that he wore in a belt about his waist.

She broke from Este and came up to him and gazed at him with passionate, imploring, searching eyes that tried to read his inmost soul.

‘You will not betray him?’ she said under her breath. ‘Now you know why I said that I must kill you if you told——’

Sanctis drew away from her.

‘I am not a spy of the police,’ he said coldly. ‘You may be satisfied of that.’

She looked at him in silence.

She did not doubt him, yet she was afraid.

A secret once disclosed is like a bird once loosed : who can say where it may go ?

‘Go, and take him with you,’ added Sanctis, with a certain harshness in his tone. ‘I shall not betray him, but these men, once they see him, will.’

‘We had better stay,’ urged Este. ‘We have both daggers ; we can do something——’

‘There must be nothing of that sort,’ said Sanctis, with cold indifference. ‘If blood were shed, the hue and cry would be out over the country and the guards here. The men will go when I speak to them.’

‘It is the father of Zirlo!’ said Musa between her teeth. ‘I will wait—but go, go, go ;—if the men of San Lionardo see you, the carabinieri of Telamone will be here to-night.’

Sanctis laid a hand on her shoulder with an imperious gesture.

‘Go out into the dark and hide—you and your friend—you have “the wisdom of the woods” you say ; use it. When I sound this whistle three times it will be safe for you to return. Go ; or you will have the men down on you—and him.’

A quick shudder of cold, like an ague,

passed over her as he spoke of Este's danger. She dropped her head on her breast and drew Este towards the inner chambers with both hands.

‘He is right,’ she said. ‘Come, oh my love! Come!’

Even in that moment of supreme peril and fear, the eyes of Este shone with a great triumph.

He glanced at Sanctis; then went.

Sanctis, left alone in the chamber of the Lucumo, heard the sound of their retreating steps as they passed across the other cells and began to ascend the rocks without.

Then he sat down on the stone bier where the Etruscan prince had lain in his golden armour, and placed his pistols beside him. He had received so great a shock that it seemed to him as if the very pulse of his life had stopped; but he was quite calm, and he listened for the sounds without with the fine ear that was his mountaineer's heritage.

As he had walked down through the woods that afternoon from Præstanella, he had overheard a scheme discussed between the father of Zefferino and two charcoal-burners of the oak forests below San Lionardo.

Their plan was to come some dozen in force and plunder the tombs, and treat the dweller there better or worse, according as she yielded to them or resisted.

‘She will resist,’ Zefferino’s father had said with a laugh, ‘and then—well, there are dead there already; and who will know?’

Then the minds of the men had inflamed themselves with mad hopes of uncountable treasure and unearthly beauty.

‘They do say she is the daughter of Lucifero,’ they had muttered one to another.

So much he had heard; passing by unseen in his grey clothes amongst the grey tangle of leafless branches and tall-growing rosemary.

He now moved into one of the inner cells all the traces of her residence there, the lute, the candelabra, the handsome bronze vessels, the look of which might tempt the San Lionardo men to plunder; then, with the lamp burning but the fire extinguished, he sat down and waited for them, and rested his eyes whilst he did so on the clay busts that wore the likeness of Musa.

‘He has been here long,’ he thought.

With his eye trained to perceive beauty in the lowliest flower, the most fleeting phase of nature, he had rendered instant justice to the personal beauty of Este, to his supple panther-like grace, to his patrician's air, to his face that was such as Lionardo might have seen in a vision of Adonis.

He understood everything now.

He needed to ask no question.

He had seen the printed notice all along the coast, offering the Government reward for the apprehension of Luitbrand d'Este. One glance at Este's face and hers had told him all he had to know.

He guessed the whole story, and he understood why she had guarded her secret so fiercely and had threatened his own life under her terror of the law.

He smiled once, bitterly.

'Poor Joconda!' he thought, 'of what use was it to stretch a dead hand from the grave?'

Then he remembered that Joconda's body was lying there, within a few feet of him.

The remembrance subdued the sardonic bitterness which was coupled with his pain. He sat still there, and time went on, and the evening deepened into night.

He remembered two years before, when he had passed through Italy on his way eastward, pausing in Ferrara, and Brescia, and Mantua, and staying longer in the latter city on account of a trial then in course of hearing in the court of justice, which had interested him by its passionate and romantic history ; it had been the trial of the young Count d'Este, accused of the assassination of his mistress. Sanctis had gone with the rest of the town to the hearing of the long and tedious examination of witnesses and of accused. It had been a warm day in early autumn, three months after the night of the murder ; Mantua had looked beautiful in her golden mantle of sunshine and silver veil of mist ; there was a white, light fog on the water meadows and the lakes, and under it the willows waved and the tall reeds rustled ; whilst the dark towers, the forked battlements, the vast Lombard walls, seemed to float on it like sombre vessels on a foamy sea.

He remembered the country people flocking in over the bridge, the bells ringing, the red sails drifting by, the townsfolk gathering together in the covered arcades and talking with angry rancour against the dead

woman's lord. He remembered sitting in the hush and gloom of the judgment hall and furtively sketching the head of the prisoner because of its extreme and typical beauty. He remembered how at the time he had thought this accused lover guiltless, and wondered that the tribunal did not sooner suspect the miserly, malicious, and subtle meaning of the husband's face. He remembered listening to the tragic tale that seemed so well to suit those sombre, feudal streets, those melancholy waters, seeing the three-edged dagger passed from hand to hand, hearing how the woman had been found dead in her beauty on her old golden and crimson bed with the lilies on her breast, and looking at the attitude of the prisoner—in which the judges saw remorse and guilt, and he could only see the unutterable horror of a bereaved lover to whom the world was stripped and naked.

He had stayed but two days in Mantua, but those two days had left an impression on him like that left by the reading at the fall of night of some ghastly poem of the middle ages. He had thought that they had condemned an innocent man, as the judge gave his sentence of the galleys for life ;

and the scene had often come back to his thoughts.

The vaulted audience chamber; the strong light pouring in through high grated windows; the pillars of many-coloured marbles, the frescoed roof; the country people massed together in the public place, with faces that were like paintings of Mantegna or Masaccio; the slender supple form of the accused drooping like a bruised lily between the upright figures of two carabineers; the judge leaning down over his high desk in black robes and black square cap, like some Venetian lawgiver of Veronese or of Titian; and beyond, through an open casement, the silvery, watery, sun-swept landscape that was still the same as when Romeo came, banished, to Mantua. All these had remained impressed upon his mind by the tragedy which there came to its close as a lover, passionate as Romeo and yet more unfortunate, was condemned to the galleys for his life. 'They have ill judged a guiltless man,' he had said to himself as he had left the court with a sense of pain before injustice done, and went with heart saddened by a stranger's fate into the misty air, along the shining water where the Mills of the

Twelve Apostles were churning the great dam into froth, as they had done through seven centuries, since first, with reverent care, the builder had set the sacred statues there that they might bless the grinding of the corn.

Sitting now in the silence of the tomb, Sanctis recalled that day, when, towards the setting of the sun, he had strolled there by the water-wheels of the twelve disciples, and allowed the fate of an unknown man, declared a criminal by impartial judges, to cloud over for him the radiance of evening on the willowy Serraglio and chase away his peaceful thoughts of Virgil. He remembered how the country people had come out by the bridge and glided away in their boats, and talked of the murder of Donna Aloysia and the sentence of Luitbrand d'Este ; and how they had, one and all of them, said, going back over the lake water or along the reed-fringed roads, to their farmhouses, that there could be no manner of doubt about it—the lover had been moonstruck and mad with jealousy, and his dagger had found its way to her breast. They had not blamed him much ; but they had never doubted his

guilt ; and the foreigner alone, standing by the mill gateway, and seeing the golden sun go down beyond the furthest fields of reeds that grew blood-red as the waters grew, had thought to himself and said half aloud :

‘Poor Romeo ! he is guiltless, even though the dagger were his——’

And a prior, black-robed, with broad looped-up black hat, who was also watching the sunset, breviary in hand, had smiled and said, ‘Nay, Romeo, banished to us, had no blood on his hand ; but this Romeo, native of our city, has. Mantua will be not ill rid of Luitbrand d’Este.’

Then he again, in obstinacy and against all the priest’s better knowledge as a Mantuan, had insisted and said, ‘the man is innocent.’

And the sun had gone down as he had spoken, and the priest had smiled—a smile cold as a dagger’s blade—perhaps recalling sins confessed to him of love that had changed to hate, of fierce delight ending in as fierce a death-blow. Mantua in her day has seen so much alike of love and hate.

‘The man is innocent,’ he had said insisting, whilst the carmine light had

glowed on the lagoons and bridges, and on the Lombard walls, and Gothic gables, and high bell-towers, and ducal palaces, and feudal fortresses of the city in whose street Crichton fell to the hired steel of bravoos.

‘The man is innocent,’ he had said that night in Mantua; and now once more he had looked upon him, and his innocence seemed no longer to him clear as then.

The priest, no doubt, he mused now, knew better than he, a prior of Mantua as he was, and able to judge aright the lover of Donna Aloysia.

To live here, sheltering himself by ruin to the one who aided him; to live here, defended by a girl’s love, maintained by a girl’s labours;—was this not as guilty a thing as to have struck the dagger through the lilies at that Mantuan woman’s breast? And baser, perhaps, because less bold than that. To Sanctis it seemed so, at the least, in this first hour of overwhelming surprise, of extreme bitterness, of intense disappointment and chagrin. To him the savage purity of her life had been sacred; he had believed in it undoubtingly. To him she had been a vestal, a dryad, Penthesilea, Maia, Britomart, everything strong, pure,

heroic, virginal, steeped in innocence as the flowers were steeped in the penetrating force of the sunlight, clothed in the impenetrable armour of an absolute ignorance of evil. He had called her Una in his own thoughts as he had gone away from her through the aisles of the evergreen-oaks.

And now——

It hurt him like a personal shame, it wounded him as if in his own honour, to find her here in the heart of the earth, side by side with the lover of that murdered Mantuan woman whom angrily to himself he called the hero of a tawdry tragedy.

He remembered that in Mantua that day he had thought the accused prisoner innocent, but now it seemed to him that he must have been in error and the judge and the priest been right. He was a man of noble temper and usually just judgment; but, unconsciously, the finding of Este there had made the Mantuan tale stand out before him in new colour, in strange guiltiness, blood-red as the sunset he had watched over the westward lake.

Nevertheless, guilty or guiltless, he had promised to save him. He had to do so, even whilst at that very hour, no doubt, this

other Lombard Romeo was hiding with her hand in his, her breath upon his cheek, in the darkness of the wooded glades and the hushed mystery of the moorland night.

By his watch two hours went by ; then, listening intently, he heard a sound of several feet moving amidst the grass above him.

They were near. He sat in the same position, but he took a revolver in each hand, ready cocked, and fixed his eyes on the stone doorway.

The steps came, heavy and trampling, down the few steps into the entrance-place.

There were some dozen men in all, black-browed fierce-eyed charcoal-burners of the mountains ; the father of Zefferino was in the rear ; he carried the only lantern amidst them ; they were all armed with daggers or knives, two or three had axes also and pickaxes.

They expected in the *buche delle fate* to find more gold than all the Emperors of Rome had owned.

Sanctis watched them, without moving ; they did not see him as they hustled and trampled through the entrance, already jealous of each other, hot with greed, burn-

ing with wicked passions, yelling aloud for the girl and the gold.

When they stumbled, like fierce, stupid cattle, into the chamber of the Lucumo, Sanctis rose, and levelled his aim at them.

‘Halt there,’ he said to them. ‘The first that advances is a dead man.’

They hung together in a throng; they did not approach. They stared in bewildered awe at the steel tubes of the pistols and at the calm, stern eyes of this unknown man.

‘What do you want?’ he asked them.

They for a moment did not speak; then the father of Zefferino, who was the ring-leader and promoter of their foray, cursed heaven and earth, and cried aloud:

‘We want the gold; there is gold here; it belongs to us of right; we are the men of the soil. She is a witch, a devil and the child of devils; she struck my own boy till almost he died under her hand. We want the gold she has found; we will let her go if she give us the gold——’

Sanctis kept his eyes fastened on them, and he saw the whole dusky, restless mass of them writhe and cringe under his gaze and the death-dealing tubes of his weapons.

‘You are wicked men,’ he said sternly ; ‘and you may thank God and me that you are spared to-night adding the blackest crimes of earth to your souls. I know all you came to do. I know the names of you all. There is no gold here ; there is nothing of any value here whatever. There are dead men’s skulls, if you be bold enough to look on them. Constantino, father of Zefferino, you lie ; and you have brought your friends on a fool’s errand. Go back as you came ; and swear by the Madonna and the Holy Spirit never to return.’

His calm voice, which had so much menace in it, awed them not less than the slim steel of his arms, beside which their knives seemed weapons so poor and slow. They were astounded and affrighted. They began to mutter against Constantino who had brought them thither, and to turn on him with gnashing teeth.

‘If you do not take the oath, it will be worse for you,’ pursued Sanctis, as he saw the impression he had made. ‘I have bought all the lands above San Lionardo ; you are all men of my ground and my forest. If I say how you have come hither to-night, the law will lay hold of you and

not let you go lightly. Gold there is none here. Had any found it, would they be such fools as not to bear it away? Learned men care for these tombs, but there is nothing in them for those who are ignorant. I treat you more peaceably than you merit. Come, take the oath I bid you while my patience lasts.'

'It was Constantino!' they muttered with one voice; and they cursed him.

'If there is no gold, there is the girl,' he shrieked in self-defence. 'Where is she?'

'She is not here,' said Sanctis. 'And if she were she should be sacred to you as your cross, or I would kill every one of you like flies. She has those who can defend her from afar, and whom you had better fear in the future. Come, I have seen enough of you; take the oath that I tell you, or I may lose my patience. I have your lives in my hand.'

They were men, ferocious enough if crossed, with all an animal's instincts without an animal's innocence; they were brutal in their lonely lives, where it was so hard for the law to reach them. They had come primed for any and every crime that the hidden sepulchres would cover, and they had

mad dreams of riches that should make them free from need to labour all their years to come. But they were so amazed, so discomfited, so cowed by the stern serenity of this northern stranger and the cruel gleam of his merciless weapons that they hustled one another uneasily to and fro, and gnashed their teeth against their misleader and deceiver; and unwillingly, yet with one voice, they swore never again to molest the tomb.

Their hungry eyes, roving over the chamber, saw its nakedness, its emptiness. The half-worked clay told no tale to them.

They felt a mortal terror of this fair-faced, cold-eyed man risen up there against them in the midst of this place of the dead. The father of little Zirlo muttered that he had meant nothing; only to share the gold honestly.

‘Go, all of you,’ said Sanctis, surprised at his own facile victory. ‘Since you repent, I too will forget. But if you transgress again, then you will find my memory is long and my bullets reach far.’

‘We will go,’ muttered the charcoal-burners, feeling still a shivering cold, as of those steel barrels pressed against their

brows ; and they began to trample backwards, hustling against each other in their mortification and confusion, and looking with strained, dazzled eyes for ever at the levelled pistols.

He heard them make their slow way out, and heard them when they reached the air fall into furious recrimination, and loud inquiries, one of each other, while the voice of Zefferino's father rose shrieking in their midst.

He went up the stone stair himself, and sent a shot up into the starry heavens.

'Be off in silence,' he called to them, 'or you will have more of these messages.'

In the fitful shadows of the night, lit only by the stars, he saw the whole troop of them seem to melt away and be swallowed up in the great void of the darkness.

The night once more was peaceable, with no other sound in it than the wings of the water-hen splashing in the pools, and the feet of the rodents scurrying through the brushwood.

He laid his ear to the ground to hearken to the retreating tread of his discomfited antagonists ; but he heard nothing save the rustle and the murmur of insects and cheir-

optera. There was no fear of the return of the San Lionardo men, for their souls were white-livered though their appetites were fierce, and they had been scared and palsied with awe of this man who had known their secret thoughts, and waited for them in the place of the dead.

He listened for half an hour or more for any echo of their returning steps, but there was nothing near save the bats wheeling through the gloom and the wood-rats running fast and noiseless through the grass.

Then he descended into the tomb; laid his pistols down upon the Lucumo's bier, and blew a dog-whistle three times. It pierced the stillness of the night air with a shrill blast.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHEN the two who had hidden, without, returned with timidity and wonder to their resting-place, they found it empty. He was no longer there; he had left them his weapons. They stood a moment, silent, from the reaction of a horrible fear and an overwhelming sense of wonder, gratitude, and rejoicing.

Then the glance of Este lighted on the slender tools of death, and he took them up and examined them with tenderness and delight.

‘He has left these for us!’ he cried to her. ‘Look! he must love you very much.’

‘It is for Joconda’s sake,’ she answered him; her face was grey with a terror that

she would never have felt for herself alone. The horror of the past hours clung to her as the spider's web clings to the hand that has touched it. A sense of cowardice and of something shameful was upon her; she could not have explained what she felt. It hurt her that all the courage, all the sacrifice of self, all the risk and peril, should have been allotted to Sanctis, not to her. It was a great debt that would for ever hang like a stone about her neck; she could never again be free to menace him, to brave him, to insult him if she chose, and drive him away with the scourge of her words.

‘He has done us a very noble service,’ said Este, as he still feasted his eyes on the pistols; ‘and he has done us a still greater, yet, by leaving these. Now we need never be taken—alive. He is a generous man. You must think so?’

‘No doubt he is generous,’ she answered slowly; then with sudden violence she turned on Este.

‘Will he stay here, think you, or go away?’

‘How can I tell?’

‘I think he will go, now that he has seen you.’

‘You had told him nothing?’

‘How could I tell him? He might have betrayed you.’

‘No; he would never do that. I wish we knew whether he would go; he loves you——’

‘I do not think so. Why should he? It is for Joconda’s sake that he does these things. I hope he will go; now that he has saved us, I can say nothing to him that I used to say.’

‘You have been harsh to him?’

‘Yes; because he wearied me. He wanted me to go to his own land, to another life. I told you all that; it troubled me and I was harsh. The other day I told him I would kill him; I had my knife out against his heart, and I would have done it. Yes; he is generous, but I do not like such debt as this laid on me. One cannot breathe under it. When I see him again, what can I say? I shall never be free;—he has saved you; how can I pay him for that if I live a thousand years?’

‘All the payment he would wish, you would not give; and if you would, I should not let you give it. Oh, my dear, you are very blind. Men love you——’

‘I do not want that,’ said Musa, with the sternness he so seldom saw in her. ‘You do not understand; he has done this to-night because it was right to do it, because he is generous, as you say; the other day I would have killed him.’

‘Because it is me that you love,’ murmured Este, as his hand laid down the pistols and stole up about her throat.

She shook him off a little roughly.

‘Yes, I love you,’ she said, with an infinite meaning in the simple words. ‘I love you. You are all I have, and I have saved you, and I would give my life for yours.’

‘That is love. Yet you are so cold——’

‘Cold? I? I think not; but do not touch me; it was *so* you touched the woman dead in Mantua. It angers me——’

She was about to say ‘it frightens me,’ but the strong courage inherent in her shrank from the acknowledgment of any fear. When he would have insisted, she still put him away from her with more sternness than he had ever seen.

‘We have escaped with our lives to-night,’ she said, with reproach and awe in her voice; ‘think not of me; pray to God.’

Then she loosened his hand off her once more, and went to where the coffin of Joconda lay, and kneeled down there and murmured her thanksgiving.

He stood by the Lucumo's bier and did not venture to follow her.

Neither did he dare to put up any prayer.





CHAPTER XXXIV:

TWO days later in the year Sanctis stood alone in the great central hall of the old fortress of which he had become lord.

The shadows of the early winter morning were grey and sombre ; a pale sunshine coming through them faintly touched a gigantic caryatide in Carrara marble at his side. In that splendid age when the prince and the noble, sheathing their swords in moments of repose, turned to the arts alike for pleasure and for glory, the lords of Massa had summoned painters of Florence to decorate and ennoble this place that was now forgotten and going to decay on the solitary mountain side, as so many other palaces and castles fade and fall, all over Italy, burying their stories with them.

The colours were dim on the vast vault of the ceiling ; the gilding of the friezes was covered with webs of dust ; the marbles of the columns and the statues were stained and broken ; but there was a grandeur in the place that gained rather than lost from that invasion of time, that dimness of age.

He had purchased, but he was about to leave it, and he knew that most likely he would never return. His heart was sick within him. He had been beaten and baffled. It seemed to him that the good and evil genius in which the Etruscan, like the Asiatic, had believed, had striven together for the soul of her, and the holier spirit had lost.

He could do nothing more. She had chosen this man, and must abide with him since that was her choice. Now more than ever it was impossible to invoke the aid of the law, since to let in one ray of light upon that myrtle-hidden necropolis would be to deliver her companion to his gaolers. There she must stay, and drift to whatever misery she might ; the burden she had bound upon her shoulders none could lift off from them against her will.

He stood in the hall of this ancient place

of Præstanella, which he had bought with a faint but happy hope which he had never cared wholly to analyse ; and his heart was heavy as he said to himself that there was no more for him to do than to turn his face for ever from this ‘ sun-bright waste,’ which would haunt him, he thought, through all the remaining years of his life.

His eyes rested, without his knowing well what they saw, on the wide landscape beyond the columns of the loggia ; on the slope of the olive-covered mountain bathed in morning vapour that drifted down and spread like a lake over all the wooded valleys and level pastures far away below. As he looked he saw a figure coming up the hillside, with the white mists all along it : a figure which always looked to him like the very divinity of the woods, which always seemed to him to have a forest fragrance and a wild doe’s grace.

She came steadily upward, clothed in her garment of lamb’s-wool, with a white cloth folded on her head as a *ciociara* wears it on the mountain ways that lie about Soracte and the Leonessa.

He saw her for awhile, mounting slowly

but surely under the olive boughs ; then he lost her from sight for a time where the rough road wound away under the outer bastions of the old fortress ; then in a little while, which seemed very long to him standing wondering and expectant there, she came unannounced through the farthest circle of the long open arcade that opened from the loggia.

She came towards him in silence, without embarrassment, without hesitation.

Himself, he neither moved nor spoke.

A great anger and a great yearning wrestled together in his heart, and held him silent.

‘I wished to thank you,’ she said simply, as she came and stood before him.

He was mute.

‘I thought I ought to thank you for all you did,’ she said again. ‘I heard that you were here, so I came.’

‘It is a long way to come for so little,’ he said, his strong emotion seeking a refuge in a commonplace truism.

‘That is nothing to me,’ she said. ‘I wished to thank you. You were brave and kind ; you were very generous ; I had been rude and thankless.’

‘Do not talk of that ; I did nothing.’

‘You did much. And you left your pistols.’

‘They may be of use.’

‘It was good of you ; and I am grateful.’

He had not looked at her since she had first entered ; he did not look at her now ; many words sprang to his lips, but he did not wish to utter them.

‘You know I am not ungrateful,’ she said wistfully. ‘That is all I came to say. You were bold and generous, and we seemed cravens. It was hard, but you understood ;—it was not for myself I would have hidden.’

‘I know,’ said Sanctis quickly. ‘I have never undervalued your courage.’

‘That is all I came to say. You will go away now, will you not?’

‘Yes ; I go away—at once.’

‘And this place?’

‘This place will not be more forsaken than it has been. It is mine, but most likely I shall never look on it again. Child, why could you not trust me? Could you think I should have betrayed your friend?’

‘How could I tell? And his secret was not mine to give away.’

Sanctis was silent; he had not yet looked at her face; her presence hurt him. He wronged her; he thought her bold and without the natural shame of her womanhood.

She had no shame because she was as yet as innocent as a forest-doe.

‘Do you want anything of me?’ he said abruptly.

She looked at him in some surprise.

‘No; I only wanted to say that. I could not bear to seem thankless and a coward. I am sorry, too, that I was harsh and rude, since you have been so brave and have saved him.’

The face of Sanctis darkened.

‘I should not have lifted my hand to save him; I did what I did for you. How can you harbour him? how can you care for him? He is a felon.’

‘He is innocent. He never killed her.’

He did not reply. The scene in the judgment-hall of Mantua rose up before his eyes.

Watching him she grew angry at his looks and at his silence.

‘You believe he is innocent? You must; you shall. He loved her; he would not have hurt a hair of her head.’

‘I was present at his trial,’ said Sanctis coldly. ‘Mantua believed him guilty.’

‘Mantua might; you could not? You are a painter of men’s faces—look in his.’

He was silent a moment. Then the justice of his nature conquered him; he remembered that when the man was nothing to him he had believed firmly in the innocence of this most unhappy lover. Had he not said to the priest on the bridge of the Argine, ‘Poor Romeo! he is guiltless.’ Should he say less to her? Should he affect to see the stain of blood because the accused was hateful to him?

‘I did believe him innocent,’ he said at length, with effort. ‘Few others did; but I believed so, though the dagger was his own with which the woman was murdered. He has told you that?’

‘Yes; it was one he had left in her chamber after a masked spectacle. He is innocent.’

Sanctis said nothing.

‘I will go now,’ said Musa. ‘I came to thank you. I do thank you from my heart; I never will forget. We shall not meet any more. Farewell.’

He turned suddenly, and for the first

time looked full at her ; his eyes were dim, and his face was pale and very troubled.

‘Oh, child, what can I say to you?’ he murmured. ‘If you would only have listened in the summer ; now it is too late. Have you thought what it is that you do?’

‘Do not speak of me. It is of no use.’

‘I fear it is of no use ; yet—even now—dear, I would always befriend you ; I would serve you in any way. You cared for Joconda ; think of her a little. If you would still put your trust in me, you might still be saved for a better life than this one—hiding in the heart of the earth with a condemned felon as your companion. Nay,—we will say he is condemned unjustly. His city does not think so. Once discovered he must suffer his sentence ; and you, as the one who has hidden him and braved the law for him, will be condemned as well.’

‘Oh, I know,’ she answered quietly ; ‘they will punish me with him—now.’

Her words were quiet, but in her eyes there shone gladness and exultation.

A revulsion of feeling came over him as he heard. He thought her devotion hardihood ; he thought her loyalty audacity.

‘They would punish you, no doubt,’ he

answered, more coldly than he had spoken before. ‘And sooner or later they will find you; the moors and the woodlands are wide and lonely, but some time the eye of the law will find him out in your cave. The peril of last night will renew itself when I am not there. He may kill you and himself, perhaps, but there will be no other way of escape.’

‘That will be as it must be; men have hidden all their life, I think, in Maremma. There are many stories——’

‘I do not wish to say what hurts you; we will not speak of him; but listen—for yourself. This man is dear to you—dear, no doubt, through his beauty and his misfortunes—but what future will he give you, with what misery does he not dower you? Leave him to me. I will busy myself with his safety; I will share his risk, I will be to him as a brother—if you will leave him and go where women can care for you, where your youth may blossom unblighted, where you may be safe and happy without any sort of fear. For me, if you will, I will swear never to see you if only you will let me place you out of the reach of harm. What can your life be as the mate of a felon hidden in a

hole in the earth? You do not seem to understand what you have become; but think once of all I say for sake of the dead woman who loved you.'

The words were wrung out of him almost despite himself. All the night long he had told himself that it was too late; that she chose her own fate and by it must abide. All the night long he had argued with himself that there was no other course for him than to set his face northward and banish her from his thoughts for ever. She was no longer lovely to him in body or mind; she seemed to him to have the gloom and taint of that Mantuan murder on her, and of the sin and shame of Saturnino. She was to him a Britomart, stripped and bound; a Penthesilea who was but her lover's slave, and did not blush to be that humbled thing. All his fancy and his faith which had grown about and rooted themselves in her had withered when she had put her hand in Este's and led him out into the night of the moorland. He could not tell that Este's lips had never touched her own; he could not tell that the 'bit of sweet basil' of a dead woman's prayers had been as a magic girdle of defence about her. He could

not tell. They dwelt there together, and he had heard her say, 'Come ; oh my love, come !'

He had meant never to look upon her face again ; he had thought of her as of a creature quite as lost and dead as the Mantuan woman was, in her grave beside the reedy waters. Yet an irresistible longing to snatch her away, to send her out into light, peace, safety, to save her from the touch of the hands that had the fetters of the galleys on them, rose up in him stronger than himself, and made him speak words which he knew were as vain as ever had been the call of Este on his murdered love.

She heard him without any movement, and she answered him without emotion. She did not understand that in his sight she had lost all her Una's innocence, all her holiness and purity of power.

'I will never be angered against you,' she said simply, 'because you saved us, and were good. But to speak to me so is foolish. It is of no use. I would not leave a fox that needed me as he needs me, and you could never be his friend ; there is no love between you. The hole in the earth is all the home I want ; we are happy in it. If

the soldiers come to take us, then we can die. That is not so terrible.'

Thereon she turned, with a long look at him, a look of reproach, and began to walk down the arched corridor, open to the air, which led out to the woods.

Sanctis put his hand up a moment to his throat as if he were choked.

A certain emotion of disgust at what seemed to him her lack of natural shame mingled in him with veneration for her fidelity, with passionate pain at her rejection.

'Wait one moment,' he said in broken tones. 'Will you say one thing to him? Say it from me. I am a rich man, as I have told you, and gold can do most things. Go, and say to him from me that I will compass his escape in some way; I will hire a vessel and a crew, and carry him in safety away in the darkness of the night (it will be possible on these lonely shores) if he will trust himself to me. Are you loyal enough to serve him so? to tell him this? It will be your own separation from him; it is only fair to warn you of that. Are you generous enough to take my message?'

She grew very pale.

She covered her eyes a moment, and was mute.

‘I do it for you, not for him,’ continued Sanctis. ‘I should care nothing if he died to-morrow; but I will do my best to aid him to escape if he will trust himself to me—that I swear to you. Will you go and tell him so?’

She was still silent; so was he.

‘It will be possible if money enough be spent on it; and I will grudge nothing,’ he added, after a long pause. ‘If he attribute to me base motives, he must do so. I do not care for his judgment. If he will come, I will aid him in every way that he may wish.’

‘You would take him to your own land?’

‘Yes.’

She said nothing more for awhile; she rested against the marble column with her hand before her eyes still. Then suddenly she looked up; she was as pale as the white marble by which she leaned.

‘I will go and tell him,’ she said simply. ‘It is for him to choose.’

Without more words she turned and began to traverse the loggia. At some little distance she looked back and spoke:

‘The way is long ; I cannot be here till to-morrow,’ she said, as she paused.

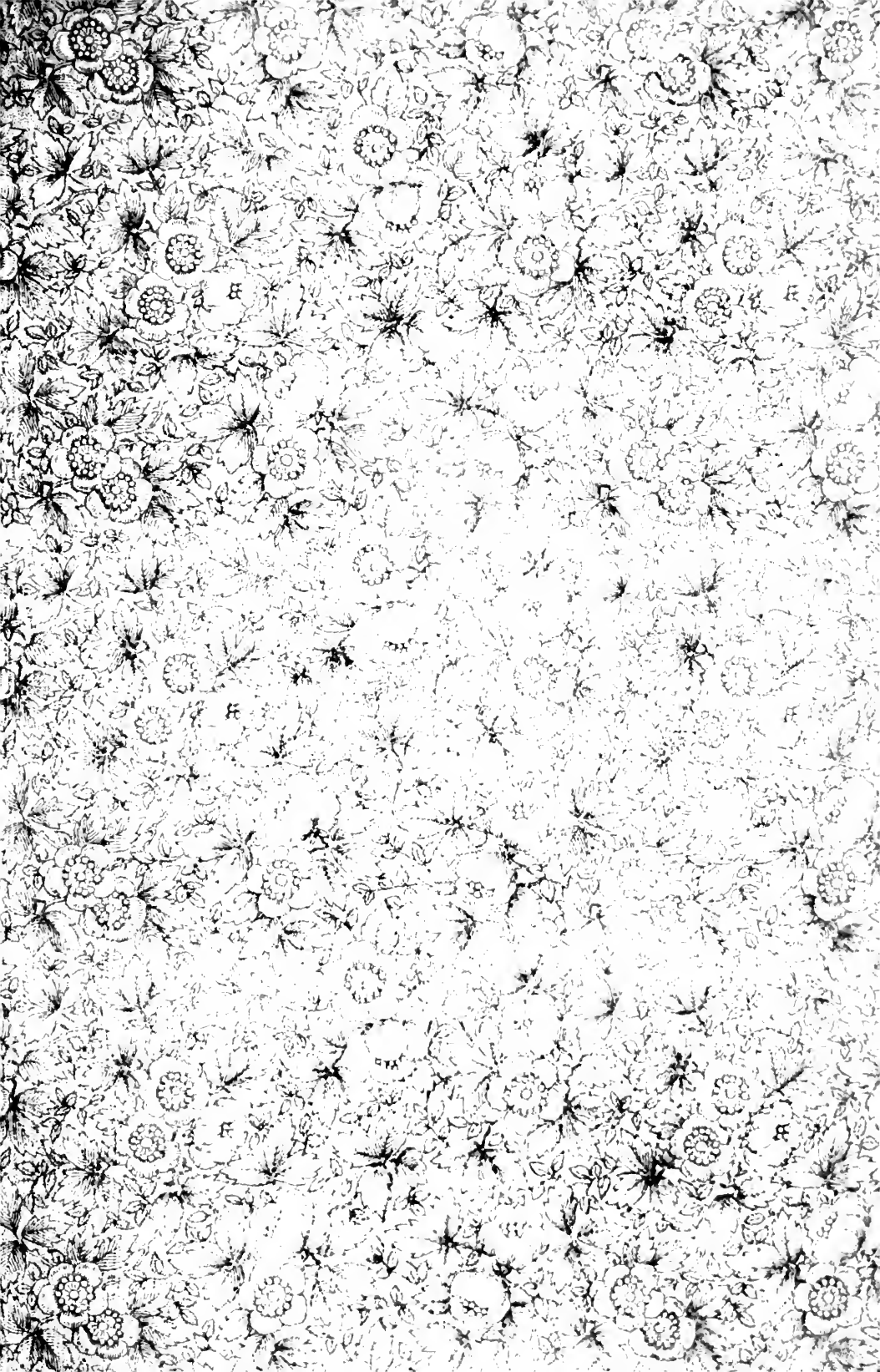
‘Will you not have a mule, a horse ? Will you not rest and eat ?’

‘No ; I will be here to-morrow.’

Then she went.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.





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